MIRA NAIR

TEACHES INDEPENDENT FILMMAKING



MASTERCLASS

MIRA NAIR / CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

"There is power in the poetry of your own language, your own skin, your own story."

BIOGRAPHY



MIRA NAIR was born and raised in Rourkela, India, and went on to study at Delhi and Harvard universities. She began her career as a stage actor in India before moving to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she transitioned to documentary films at 20 years old. Her narrative feature debut, *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), won the Camera d'Or and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language film. A resourceful and determined independent filmmaker who casts unknowns alongside acclaimed actors, Mira has directed *Mississippi Masala* (1991), *The Perez Family* (1995), *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* (1996), *Hysterical Blindness* (2002), *Vanity Fair* (2004), *The Namesake* (2006), *Amelia* (2009), and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2012). Her most recent film, *Queen of Katwe*, about a Ugandan girl with an aptitude for chess, stars Lupita Nyong'o and David Oyelowo. Mira recently directed the musical version of her acclaimed film *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) at the Berkeley Repertory Theater, where it had an extended, sold-out run this past summer and is now Broadway-bound. She is the director of BBC's forthcoming adaptation of *A Suitable Boy,* to be released in 2020.

Hi Students,

I want to take this opportunity to welcome you to my MasterClass and share what I've learned about filmmaking with you. Bringing new voices and stories to film has been a passion of mine. It's why I began filmmaking in the first place. From my documentaries to my feature films and now to the Maisha Film Lab for emerging filmmakers in East Africa, I've always looked for ways to make our screens alive with the diversity of who we all are. That includes you, and your story, no matter what else you might have been told.

When I was working to make *Mississippi Masala*—after being nominated for an Oscar for *Salaam Bombay!*—I was told that I ought to consider making room for a white protagonist, despite having Denzel Washington as the lead … I laughed, promising them that all the waiters in this film would be white—and was shown the door. Rejection spurs me on, it makes me feel I'm doing something right. So has dealing with limited budgets.

Now, I'm honored to share what little I know with you: to find the story that is distinctly yours and stay true to it, to make a big impact even if your budget is small, and to direct on set and lead a team. We'll workshop through a process to draw the best from your professional and non-actors.

All of this is with the end goal of helping any of you with the passion, discipline, and obsession to create a film. Cultivate stamina. Put aside reward. It matters that you stick with it, that you embrace learning and challenges, too. That's why I'm here to help.

If we don't tell our own stories, no one else will.

MIRA NAIR / CHAPTER TWO

DISCOVERING YOUR UNIQUE VOICE

"Don't be afraid of putting yourself, your work, culture, language, and your people at the heart of your vision and craft."

DISCOVERING YOUR UNIQUE VOICE

Subchapters

CHAPTER REVIEW

We go to the movies to have a collective experience, to have our minds and hearts opened to new ways of thinking and feeling. To discover what we share in common with other human beings, no matter how different they seem to us. For Mira, the best films are those that balance opposites: revealing tenderness in brutality, the unexpected in the familiar, and the extraordinary in the ordinary. She has always put her own culture, language, and identity at the forefront of her craft.

Mira developed her unique voice without formal training in fiction filmmaking. Instead, she studied observational documentary called cinéma vérité, or 'cinema of truth' at Harvard and MIT. This style involves spending several months (or more) immersed in a community, building trust, and following characters as their lives unfold. The filmmaker does not manipulate the events captured on camera, and instead 'finds' the story later in the editing room where a narrative is crafted.

Frustrated by the limited audience for documentary in the 1980's, and wanting more control over gesture, light and story telling, this propelled Mira towards fiction. Her first feature film was *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), about the resilience of children in the streets of Bombay. Mira's vérité roots show through clearly in this film, which was shot on location with natural sound, and with dialogue written in the slang of Bombay. It was a risky first film, and not like anything audiences in either India or America had yet seen.

The risk paid off. Following *Salaam Bombay!*'s success, Mira began to get courted by Hollywood studios. But she remained fiercely independent, and held to a strict criterion for choosing her next project: "Can anyone else make this film? Or is this a film only I can make?" For Mira, being a South Asian female is central to her identity, enabling her to enter spaces that a white male filmmaker could never access. She trusts her own original voice, which emerges from her own sense of language, people, and culture.

Her determination to stay rooted led Mira to make a controversial pitch for her second film. *Mississippi Masala* would bring a love story between a brown and a black character to the big screen, something that Hollywood had never attempted before. Mira collaborated with her Harvard classmate Sooni Taraporevala, who wrote the script specifically for Denzel Washington as the romantic lead. Mira hoped that Denzel's involvement would guarantee a green light for the project, yet several studios were deeply hesitant about the lack of a white protagonist. Mira forged on, and the film's 'never before' aspect turned out to be precisely why *Mississippi Masala* resonated with audiences and remains impactful to this day.

The lesson from Mira's success is to trust yourself and the story you want to tell. To have

the courage to be distinct. Don't think that you have to make a film that studio executives want you to make, or that you can't make a film because it's never been done before. Make your film precisely because audiences have never before seen this story told on screen. Find your original voice, trust it, and your film will find an audience.

DID YOU KNOW?

Mira describes how her first film, *Salaam Bombay!*, was "a novelty both in India as well as outside India." This feeling of belonging to neither tradition, and yet reaching audiences everywhere, led Mira to joke about naming her company DKK Productions, in reference to a popular Urdu saying: "Dhobi ka kutta Na ghar ka Na ghat ka." (A washerman's dog belongs no place, neither at home nor on the street, yet at home everywhere.) Instead, Mira named her company Mirabai Productions. The term 'bai' is used in India to respectfully address a woman.

LEARN MORE

Beginning in the 1960s, new hand-held camera technology enabled filmmakers to follow real-life events in a way that was more intimate and less obtrusive than had been previously possible. What emerged was the method of filmmaking in which Mira was trained, known as cinéma vérité. Filmed on location with non-actors, vérité docs focus on everyday situations, are shot with continuous action and unscripted action and dialogue, and often delve into social and political issues.

The style originated in Europe, but evolved into 'direct cinema' when it was imported to the US and Canada. Direct cinema, to an even greater degree than cinéma vérité, emphasizes non-intervention, striving for an observational 'fly on the wall' approach by the filmmakers. Today, the terms cinéma vérité and direct cinema are often used interchangeably to describe a style that feels real and that follows impromptu rather than scripted action.

Watch one or more of the following classic films that emerged from these two intertwined traditions. These films inspired Mira to choose the path of filmmaking.

Chronicle of a Summer (1961) is an experiment by French filmmakers Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch, who use their camera and their presence to provoke action: in this case, by stopping people on the streets of Paris and asking, "Are you happy?"

Titicut Follies (1967) is Frederick Wiseman's haunting portrayal of the Bridgewater State Hospital for the Criminally Insane in Massachusetts. The film documents the disturbing treatment of inmates by those who were supposed to care for them.

Don't Look Back (1967) follows singer-songwriter Bob Dylan on tour as he makes a bold shift from folk to rock. D.A. Pennebaker's film is now a pop culture classic, owing largely to its opening, when Dylan performs "Subterranean Homesick Blues."

La Jetée (1962), directed by Chris Marker, blends science fiction with documentary techniques. The short film, part of the French Left Bank/New Wave movement, is a montage of still photographs that reflect the protagonist's memories as he travels through time.
If you are eager to learn more about the history of documentary filmmaking, read Erik Barnouw's classic book *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (Oxford University Press, 1993).

ASSIGNMENT

To make distinctive films, you need to have a distinctive voice. Take several minutes to journal about what makes you unique. Respond to the following questions:

Think about the people you know, your family and friends. How do they speak, think, or act? With whom do you most strongly identify? Who is important to you, and how have they made you who you are today?

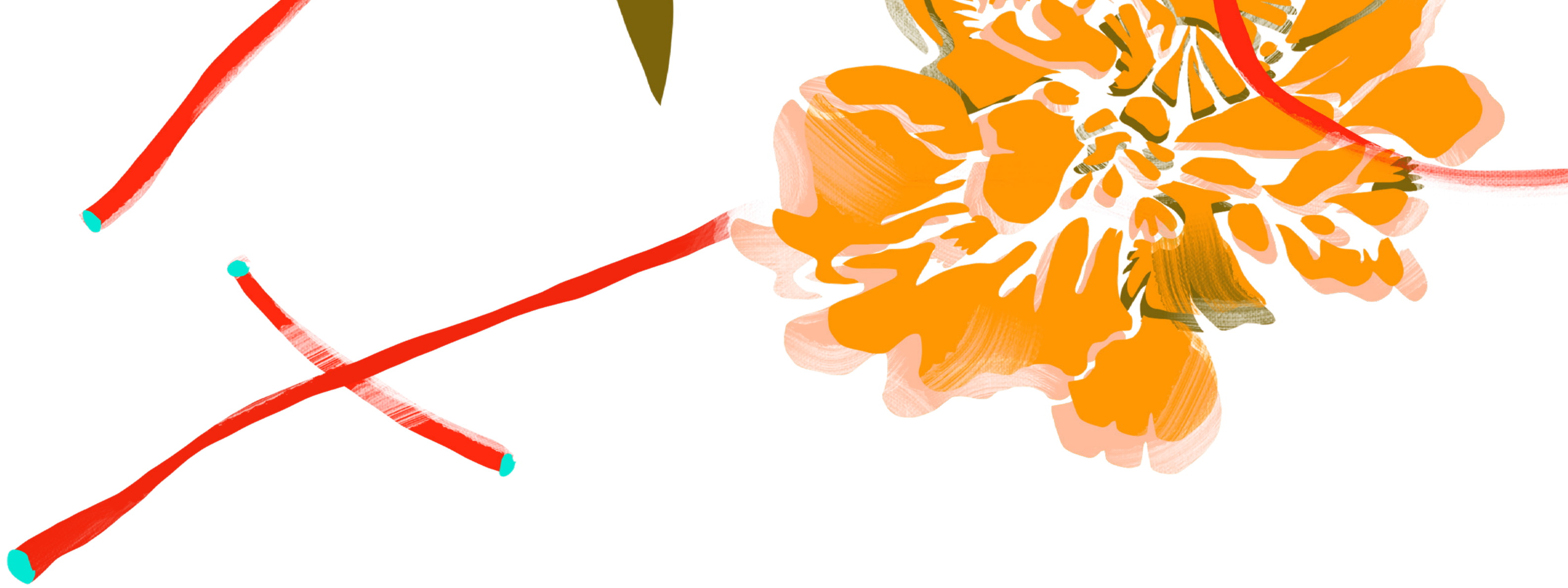
Think about the places you have lived or visited. Where did you grow up, and how did it shape you? Where have you chosen to live as an adult, and why? What makes a place feel like home, and what places do you long to explore?

Think about the memories from your past that are especially vivid and personal. Write about what you learned from those experiences, and how they impacted you. How do they affect your current viewpoint on life?

Think about how you experience the world around you. Are you drawn to particular aspects of your environment, such as sounds, colors, or tactile elements? How might these proclivities influence your storytelling style?

Think about your values and belief system. What is meaningful to you? What do you feel is the purpose of existence? Are you deeply committed to a cultural philosophy or faith tradition, or are you pioneering your own path? How might your worldview influence the stories you want to tell?

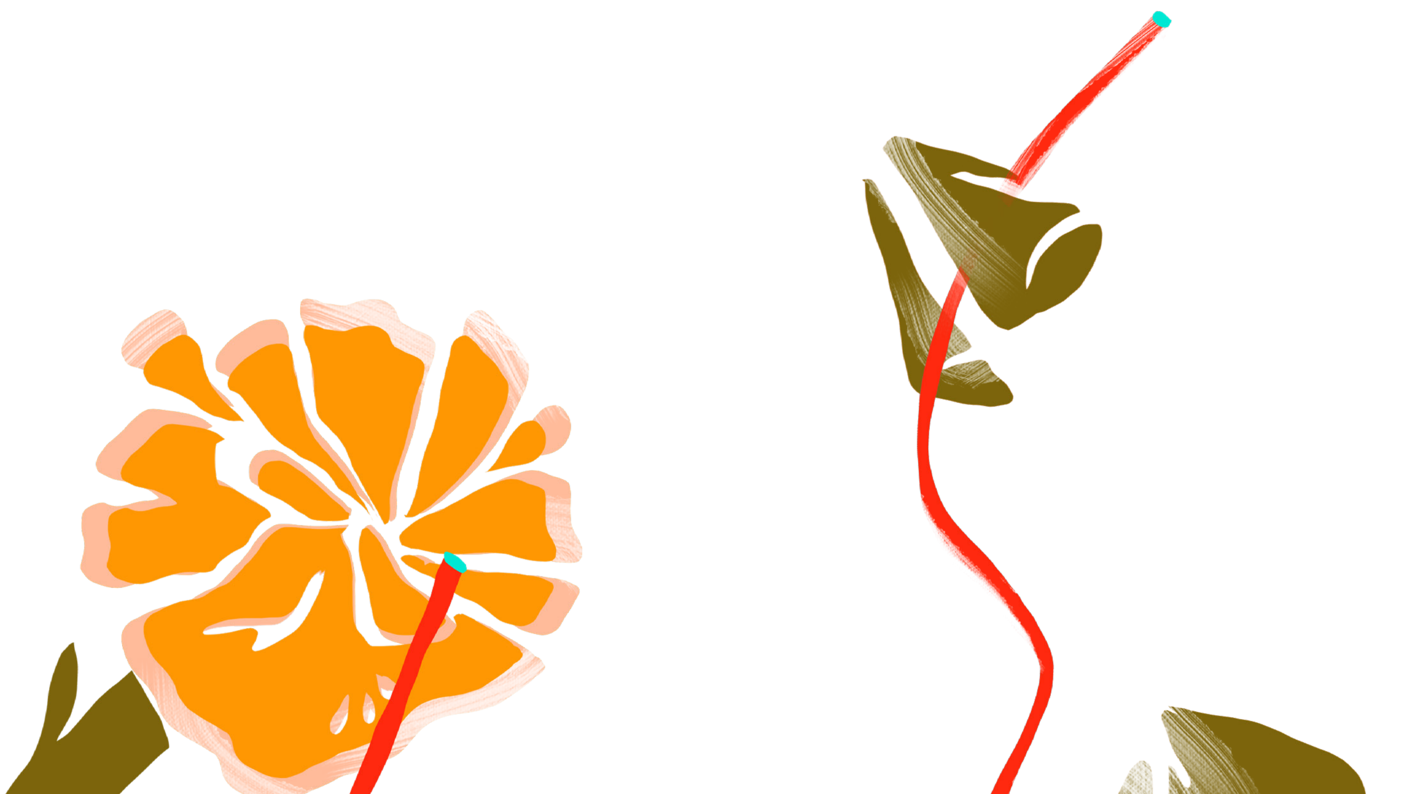
All of these dimensions—people, places, memories, perceptions, and beliefs—are important to consider when thinking about what makes your voice distinctive. Have a clear sense of who you are as a person, as a storyteller, and as a filmmaker, and know what you bring to the table that nobody else can. Make your distinctiveness your calling card.



MIRA NAIR / CHAPTER THREE

FINDING THE STORY

"The only way I have found stories
is being a student of life."



FINDING THE STORY

Subchapters

CHAPTER REVIEW

Before storytelling can begin, you must first engage in a process of story finding. Truly new stories are rare, and the best way to discover them is to constantly engage your curiosity in the world around you. Your goal should be to find a story that captures your imagination and doesn't let go. Once that happens, acquaint yourself with the work of filmmakers who have tackled similar subjects before. The aim is not to imitate what the great people before you have done, but to develop your own voice and approach.

A wonderful starting point for inspiration is the written word. Indians were raised on a diet of Russian and English classics, such as Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Keats. When Mira discovered Indian writers writing fiction in English, she was inspired. Her choice of films, *The Namesake, The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and the forthcoming *A Suitable Boy* reflects her passion to tell stories from her own literary world.

Find a writer to work with who matches your own style and taste. This person will be your most important collaborator in developing your story, and should share your visual sensibility, sense of humor, and knowledge of the subject. If you are telling a story outside your experience, then do the research needed to 'inhabit' that world. Explore books and works of art that come out of that culture, involve yourself in the community, and get to know your subject first-hand. As you work on the script together, write each scene with a clear intention, yet also try to weave in additional layers of meaning and subtext so that each moment is doing several things at once.

Interestingly, Mira believes that specificity is key to helping your audience relate to unfamiliar characters and places. The more specific the details are in your story, the more the principles of that story are clear. For instance, Mira chose in her film *Monsoon Wedding* to preserve her characters' unique way of speaking three different languages in one sentence. Although most Western audiences were quite unfamiliar with this practice, they could still relate to the honesty and humor of the dialogue, and were willing to follow along with the necessary subtitles. The story, in its particularity, connected with audiences everywhere. The more local you are, the more universal you can become.

Of course, there is always the chance that such details will be confusing for the unacquainted—and confusion can prevent a story from becoming universal. For that reason, always test your screenplay by sharing it with your inner circle of trusted friends and colleagues. Ask where they are confused or bored, and what their understanding is of the story's world and the character's motivations. If their understanding does not match what you intended, address those discrepancies in your next draft. Revise

rigorously and repeatedly in order to create clarity for those unfamiliar with your story, while still preserving what is fresh and distinctive about your approach.

Before you finalize your script, sweep through one more time to strip out any words from the dialogue that are didactic or redundant with the visual drama of the story. The goal for your writing should be to transport viewers to a world that is new and unfamiliar, and yet still relatable. Your challenge as a writer is to translate those 'foreign' elements without pandering to the audience or making it feel as though they are being given a lecture about another culture. Strive to reveal, rather than lecture, and to show, rather than tell.

DID YOU KNOW?

Lovers of fiction will probably recognize the names of several contemporary South Asian authors like Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Vikram Seth, Mohsin Hamid, and V.S. Naipaul. But the writers whose work Mira mentions as having deeply influenced her as a teenager are less well-known outside the Indian subcontinent. If you are curious to immerse yourself in literature by the same authors that Mira explored in her formative years, start with her recommended reading below.

Ved Mehta (born 1938 in Lahore, British India) lost his sight at the age of three and went on to become a writer of m ore than 24 books. His first novel, *Delinquent Chacha,* was serialized in *The New Yorker* in 1966, and he was a staff writer on the magazine fro 1961 to 1994.

Anita Desai (born 1937 in Mussorie, India) teaches creative writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and has been publishing novels for over 55 years. She has been shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize for three different novels: *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984), and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). *Clear Light of Day*, a coming-of-age story set in Old Delhi, the neighborhood where she grew up, is her most autobiographical and most popular novel—you should easily be able to find the reprint edition, released in 2000 by Mariner Books.

Nayantara Sahgal (born 1927 in Allahabad, British India) is a novelist and political commentator who was born into the 'first family' of India, being both a niece of Jawaharlal Nehru, and a cousin of Indira Gandhi. She has remained independent and even critical of her family's politics, and her memoirs and essays explore deeply feminist concerns. Her most acclaimed novel, *Rich Like Us* (1985), is set during a period of political upheaval in India during the 1970s known as 'The Emergency.'

LEARN MORE

As you sit down to write your screenplay, you may realize that you're not positive how your document should look. At what margin setting should your dialogue be indented? What font should you use? When should you use shot headings, and do you bold them, underline them, or write them in all caps? Professional Hollywood scripts have an unwritten standard for formatting and style—and luckily an insider from Warner Bros. has written those standards down in a handy reference book. *The Hollywood Standard, 2nd edition* by Christopher Riley (Michael Wiese Productions, 2009) will help you avoid common mistakes, share clear examples of how to format and punctuate shot headings,

directions, dialogue, and transitions, and guarantee that your final draft will look clean and professional.

Alternatively, if you have a couple hundred bucks to spare, invest in screenwriting software like Final Draft or Movie Magic Screenwriter, or less expensive alternatives like Fade In and the subscription-based Celtx. These tools take care of the formatting for you, so that you don't have to fiddle with margins, spacing, page breaks, and other clunky word processing commands. These programs also feature many other tools to help you create storyboards, shot lists, schedules, and budgets—but if you'd rather strip out the bells and whistles and work with a free program with the bare formatting essentials, go with Amazon Storywriter.

ASSIGNMENT

Part 1: Finding Your Story

Try the hands-on approach to story finding that Mira recommends: travel, educate yourself, pay attention to current events, and get involved. Choose one or more of the following exercises to get your creative juices flowing.

TRAVEL. Choose a nearby destination that you have overlooked, that you are unfamiliar with and have rarely, if ever, passed through. Counterintuitively, you don't have to fly overseas in order to find unexplored places. Simply visit a new neighborhood and hit the pavement, with a notebook and pen handy. Explore the streets, step inside storefronts, and talk to the locals. Jot down observations, questions, and discoveries, as well as highlights from your conversations. What stories could you tell about the people who live here?

EDUCATE YOURSELF. Gain familiarity and knowledge about a subject matter that intrigues you. You can easily start by reading a book, but don't stop there. Explore different facets of the topic as they appear in films, works of art, TV and radio programs, musical compositions, live performances, and more. Take note of what inspires or excites you, and use that to guide your story finding.

PAY ATTENTION TO CURRENT EVENTS. If you don't already subscribe to a newspaper, start now. For at least a week, make a daily practice of reading the news from start to finish. Go beyond the headlines and front-page stories that everyone talks about. What are the local stories? What's happening in your own backyard? Look for unexpected and overlooked stories, and find the extraordinary in the ordinary.

GET INVOLVED. The most intimate and authentic stories often come from personal experience. If you squirrel away and do nothing but read, there is only so much you can learn. Get firsthand knowledge by immersing yourself in a community or cause. If the issue of homelessness interests you, volunteer at a soup kitchen. If you are fascinated by 3D printing, join a maker space. Commit at least one hour a week to participating in an organized activity—and gain direct access to story possibilities.

Part 2: Writing Your Story

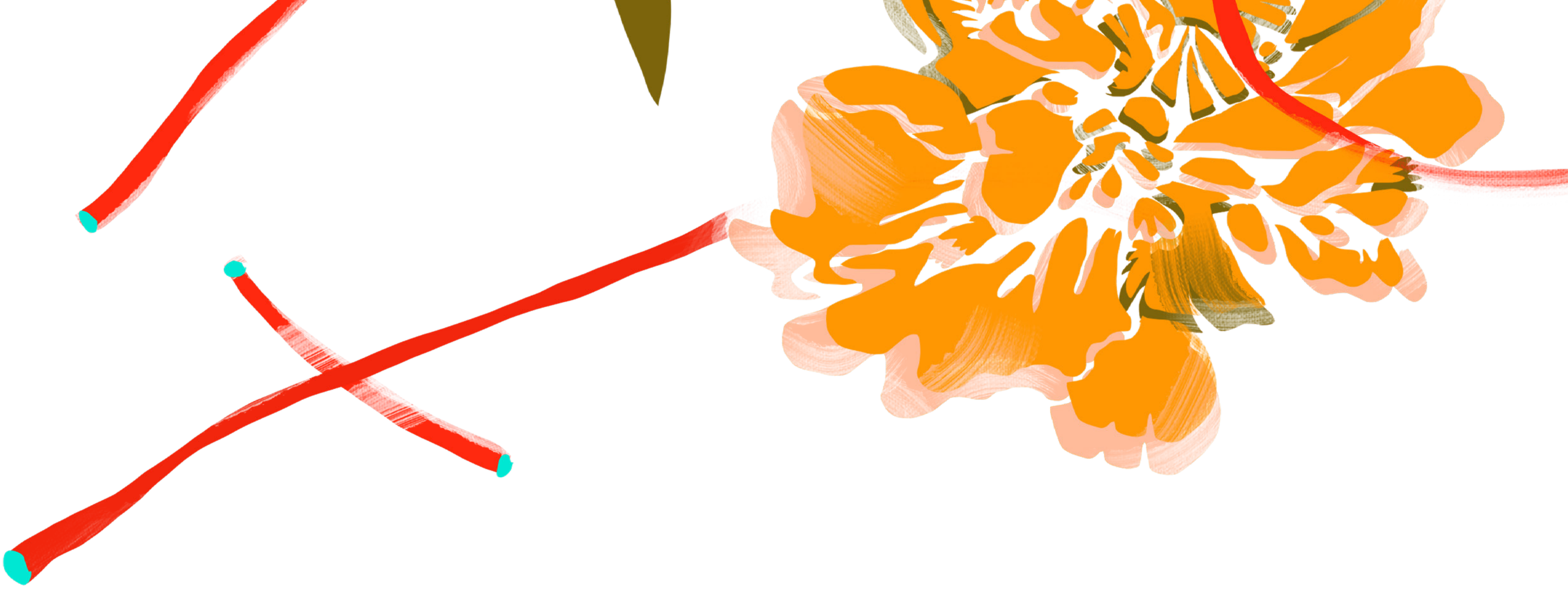
A first draft of a feature-length film can take anywhere from six to twelve full weeks to write. If you don't have that much time available right now, start smaller. Aim to write a script either for a 10-minute short film, or for a scene from your envisioned film that stands out clearly and vividly in your imagination.

If you have a writing partner, schedule several large chunks of time together over the next week or two. If you're writing solo, block out time in your schedule to focus.

Begin by identifying a clear intention for your short film or scene. What is at stake for your characters—the central conflict or tension? What outcomes do they want, and what actually happens? Once you have identified a clear central through-line, then add layers of subtlety. How can you build complexity so that your scene conveys more than one thing?

As you write, strive for the kind of specificity that Mira encourages. What concrete details will make the world of your story feel real and authentic, rather than generic? If you describe a character as being a heavy smoker, for instance, then specify the brand of cigarette. Identify the particular visual attributes that will anchor the story in your viewer's attention.

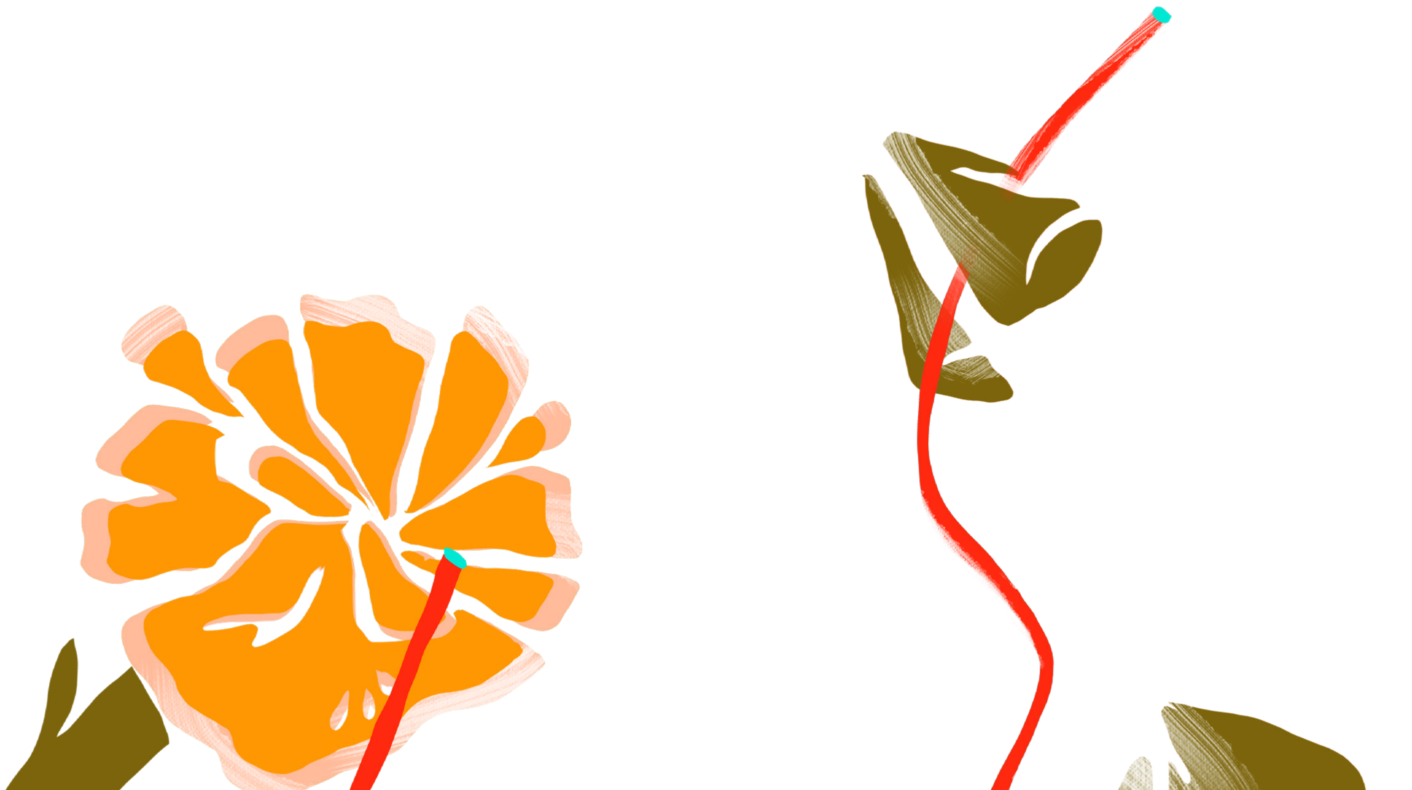
When you have a draft that does what you set out to do, share your screenplay with two or three trusted friends. Ask them to verbalize what they think motivates your characters, and check for confusions or misunderstandings about the plot. Then, revise!



MIRA NAIR / CHAPTER FOUR

STRETCHING YOUR BUDGET

"My job is to transport you to a world where none of my limitations and struggle show."



STRETCHING YOUR BUDGET

Subchapters

- Don't Reveal Your Struggle
- Prep to Maximize the Scene
- Plan Your Set Pieces
- Use the Natural Elements
- Serve the Story
- Weigh the Value of Your Choices

CHAPTER REVIEW

When you are first conceiving your film, don't think about the budget. Write your story first. Budgeting is the creative act of figuring out how to do justice to your idea in a way that doesn't reveal that you are a struggling independent filmmaker.

Mira has always managed to fit the size of her budget in an interesting way without the need of being apologetic. Sometimes, as with *Salaam Bombay!*, she spends the majority of her money on high quality cinematography to guarantee that the film will look incredible on the big screen. For instance, the climax of the film takes place within the public spectacle of a Ganapati festival for the elephant god Ganesha. Rather than staging this event with hundreds of paid extras, Mira filmed during the actual festivities, protecting her main characters inside a small circle of actors who themselves were surrounded by the surging crowd. Because the budget allowed for only one camera, the strategy required careful advance planning to block the action and identify where to place the cinematographer and actors. The result was a grandly scaled set piece that effectively disguised the low budget.

Mira calls preproduction "cheap time," because you can afford to really think through how to stretch your budget in preparation for the much more expensive phase of production and shooting. Such pre-planning is vital to preserving the intention and scale of your film. The cinematographer, locations manager, and script supervisor are your three most important collaborators in this endeavor. Together, scope out each scene on location, and design what will be the most effective vantage points for the camera. Your script supervisor will advise you as to how to maintain continuity, or self-consistent details, in your coverage of the various actions from scene to scene. (For instance, if a crowd riots at the sight of a gun, then you had better film a close-up of the gun!) The result will be a shot breakdown that serves as a helpful 'table of contents,' a kind of checklist that helps you to determine exactly which shots you need to get, and how to organize your production timeline to minimize costs and maximize your efficiency.

Throughout the shooting of your film, plan to collect a "bank of images" that don't necessarily fall strictly under your scheduled shot list. Every film needs breathing space, and in the edit room you may discover the need to show the passage of time, evoke a space, or simply transition between locations. Some directors schedule a day or more of pick-up shots and so does Mira. She believes in filming a bank of shots that can be used in many ways in the edit. Work with your cinematographer to make sure they understand what visuals you are excited by, and encourage them to explore the potential of each location. If a bird lands on a telephone wire, for instance, film that bird and put the image in "the bank." You never know when it may come in handy.

Use natural elements to your advantage whenever possible. Instead of artificially staging weather conditions with expensive equipment like rain machines, wait to film your scene during an actual rainstorm. Mira recommends going into every exterior shoot with a plan A, when the sky is sunny and blue, and a plan B, where if it rains, you switch gears immediately to take advantage of the weather. Your film will look big budget, even when it's not—but you have to plan effectively.

You must plan for worst-case scenarios and figure out how to turn them to your advantage. After the initial shooting for *Monsoon Wedding* had wrapped, four days of film reels were compromised due to X-ray damage while being shipped to New York. Rather than despairing, Mira had those reels processed anyway, and cut her rough cut with the damaged footage. Meanwhile, she applied for and was granted an insurance claim. She used the money for reshoots, but since she had already cut the film, she was able to assess the story for areas of improvement. She decided that more rain was needed, and was now able to afford rain machines for a key scene showing the bride caught in her car with her lover, and pulled into the drenching rain by the police. The seemingly disastrous loss of footage made possible one of the most visually striking scenes in the film.

Studios often rely on big name actors to market their films to audiences, but big name actors cost money. Carefully weigh the worth of different casting possibilities. Don't spend a lot of money on a small role just to give the film a boost in name recognition. Instead, invest money in an actor who will raise the bar for the rest of the cast. For example, in *Monsoon Wedding*, the patriarch and center of the family is the character of Lalit Verma, the father of the bride. Because this role would affect the casting of every character around him, a truly great performer would be needed. Mira relied on the legendary actor Naseeruddin Shah, whose presence was enough to elevate everyone else's performances. Mira used a variation of this principle in the casting of an unknown actor, Riz Ahmed, as the lead in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. The combination of established and lesser-known actors sharing the screen together resulted in stronger performances throughout the film.

LEARN MORE

Whether or not you've secured funding for your project, you should estimate how much your current vision will cost. If this is your first film, it's hard to know where to start. The following resources will help you get the ball rolling, create a sensible budget, and begin planning a realistic production timeline.

- *Producer to Producer: A Step-by-Step Guide to Low-Budget Independent Film Producing, 2nd Edition* by Maureen Ryan (Michael Wiese Productions, 2017). This comprehensive guidebook is geared to emerging producers, and covers every aspect of the film-production process, from script development to marketing and distribution. Particularly relevant are chapters two (script breakdown), three (budgeting), and eleven (scheduling). Notably, the book features a helpful series of checklists (also available on a companion website) to help keep you on target for each stage of the project.

- *Scheduling and Budgeting Your Film: A Panic-Free Guide* by Paula Landry (Focal Press, 2011). This clear and easy-to-read book explains the fundamentals of line producing, or managing a film's budget,

with tips for how to create shot breakdowns, organizing an efficient production schedule, accurately pricing costs, and optimizing each shoot.

- StudioBinder provides customizable solutions for production managers, such as script breakdowns, shot lists, storyboards, shooting schedules, contact lists, task management and calendars, and more. Available at several different subscription levels, as well as for a free trial, the website also publishes a helpful blog filled with tips and 'hacks' for preproduction.

DID YOU KNOW?

The term 'blocking' is thought to come from Victorian-era drama, when show runners such as Gilbert and Sullivan would plan their productions by first creating a miniature model of the set, and then using thin blocks of wood to represent the actors. Today, the term has evolved to mean working with performers to figure out their body positions, gestures, and movements on stage. In cinema, blocking also involves working out the placement and movements of the camera, and can impact the lighting, set design, and more. It is thus an essential part of the planning process during preproduction.

Blocking can be an art unto itself, and is similar in many ways to dance choreography. What are the characters actually "doing" in the scene? How can their motions embody the text? The movements of actors can be crafted during the rehearsal process in artful ways that reveal additional subtext in the dialogue, as well as reflect the relationships between characters, direct the focus of the viewer, and create effective compositions for the camera.

In this MasterClass, blocking will be explored in more depth beginning with Chapter 8: Scene Workshop: Read-Through and Blocking.

ASSIGNMENT

Part 1: Breaking Down Your Script

After completing your screenplay, there is an intermediary step you should take before drafting your production budget—create a *script breakdown* of all the production elements that will be required to tell your story.

Begin by printing out your script and dividing each page into eight parts (you should literally draw horizontal lines across the page to delineate eight equal units of writing). This will help you examine your script in microscopic detail and ensure that you don't miss anything.

Next, gather a half a dozen or more highlighters of various colors. Comb through every page and every scene of the script, and designate a different color for each of the following elements:

CHARACTERS AND EXTRAS: Identify each and every role that is explicitly mentioned in the script. You will then be able to draw up a cast list for your film, and estimate how much screen time each cast member will get. The general rule of thumb is that one page of the script equals approximately one minute of runtime in the final film. Realistically, an indie film should be able to shoot about two or three pages per day—so you can then extrapolate from that the number of shoot days needed. Record the expected time commitment from each actor and use that figure to estimate salary.

PROPS, FURNITURE, AND COSTUMES: Identify every material object that is needed to 'dress' the world of your script, and then research and calculate the rental and purchasing costs for these items.

VEHICLES AND ANIMALS: Identify each instance that a character drives a vehicle or interacts with a pet or animal. These involve special considerations, such as insurance and appropriate handlers, that will impact costs.

SOUNDS AND MUSIC: Most audio will be added in post, but take special note of instances where actors need to react to something audible in real time. Budget for any on-set foley sounds or live music that is specified in the script.

EFFECTS AND MAKE-UP: Depending on the nature of your script, you may also identify instances where practical effects will be needed, such as fire or rain, or special makeup effects such as prosthetics, blood, or aging techniques.

STUNTS: Action films aren't the only genre to involve risky scenes for actors. Identify any potentially unsafe maneuvers in your film, and consult with a stunt coordinator to estimate cost for shooting those scenes safely.

You won't be able to arrive at a realistic budget estimate until you itemize every potential expense in your screenplay, in addition to the daily salaries of your crew. The script breakdown is an essential prerequisite to production, and will help you identify ways to save money by calling out disproportionately pricey elements. Figure out what can be cut without losing anything essential for the story, and how to get the most bang for your buck.

Part 2: Storyboarding Your Shot List

Related to the script breakdown is the shot list. In the same way that you combed through the script for production elements, you should examine every scene to determine the kind of coverage—wide shot, close-ups, dolly shots, et cetera—you need in order to tell your story visually. As Mira suggests, this process is best done in close collaboration with your cinematographer.

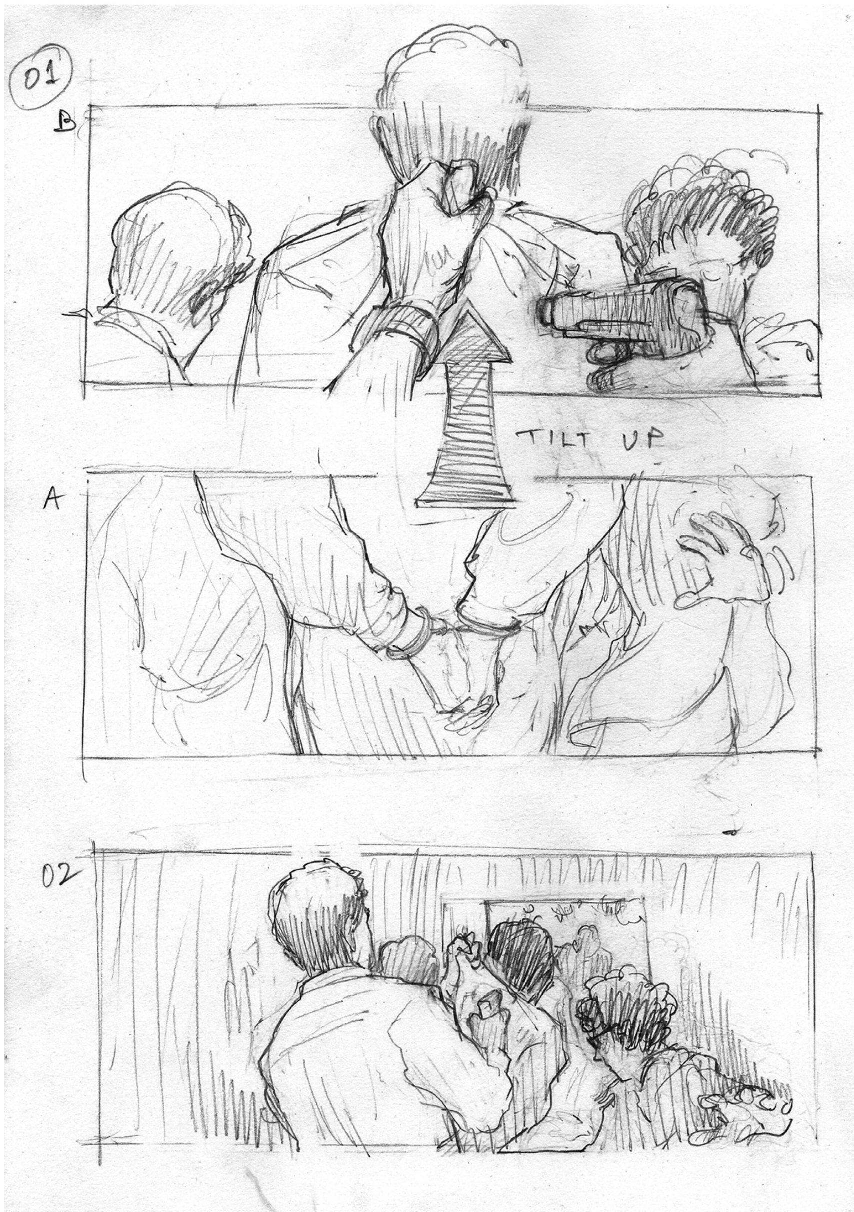
For the truly complex set pieces in your film, you may want to work with a storyboard artist to help you visualize the framing, movement, and sequence of shots that you will use to tell your story. Think of the storyboard as the graphic novelization of your script, where each panel represents a new camera angle or a key moment in the action. The aim of storyboarding is twofold: to ensure that you get all the coverage you need on set to craft a coherent and exciting story in the edit room, and to do so in an economical way, so as to avoid spending time and money filming unnecessary shots.

Mira found storyboarding to be essential when planning a climactic action sequence for *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, when an innocent bystander is shot in the midst of the chaos of a restless crowd, triggering a riot. The storyboard that her team created is included on the following page and is exclusive to this MasterClass workbook. Inspect the panels in sequence, taking the time to visualize each drawing in your mind's eye as though it were a freeze frame from the film. As you piece together the action, note the use of graphical arrows to show motion, including the movements of actors out of the frame or into a car, for instance, as well as the expected motion of the camera, including tilts, pans, and zooms.

If you want to compare this early visualization with the final edit, rent or stream *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. The riot scene begins at 1 hour 55 minutes, runs for three minutes, and took 13 pages and 38 panels to storyboard. Examine how closely the two products match, and note places where the cinematography and editing diverge from the artist's original rendering. Although there are considerable differences, you should be able to spot key moments that were retained from start to finish.

Choose one of the more complex sequences in your own film, and work with your cinematographer to scope out a vision for the scene. List all of the shots that you anticipate needing as raw material, and then work with a storyboard artist to map them out in a proposed sequence for the edit. If you need help finding an experienced and qualified artist, consider starting your search on Jorgen's List, Upwork, or the public Facebook group "Frame Dump."

RIOT SCENE – STORYBOARDS
20/11



1A

1B

2

MIRA NAIR / CHAPTER FIVE

CASTING

"The task of a director is to make each actor, whether hero or extra, bloom."

CASTING

Subchapters

CHAPTER REVIEW

When Mira first started in film, there were no casting directors in India, and she had to find actors through the grapevine. Only later in her career would she discover the value that a casting director can bring to the process, with their wide connections and access to talent. The best casting directors will share your own sensibility, and yet also bring to the table unexpected and creative choices—options that may end up transforming your own vision for a character or scene.

Sometimes the best talent for a role will be clear as day. When Mira saw an independent film with a riveting performance by Shefali Shah, she called the actress immediately about playing the role of Ria in *Monsoon Wedding*.

Other times, a role will call for non-traditional casting, and a search for new talent begins. The best way to ensure that your casting process will result in fruitful discoveries is to make sure actors feel comfortable and relaxed during their auditions. Actors who feel pressured and judged will be less willing to take risks, and thus less likely to reveal something exciting. Your goal, then, should be to help them breath easy, by creating an affectionate and warm atmosphere where experimentation and play is welcome. Look for performances that bring something fresh and unexpected to the table, and then respond and encourage further exploration.

An important quality to look for in new talent is a lack of vanity. Mira looks to cast actors who are honest, unassuming, and pure in their performance. The spirit that someone radiates is just as important as their acting skill. For *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Mira spent a year searching for someone to play the film's lead, Changez—A worldly young man who would be equally at home in Lahore and New York's Wall Street. She finally discovered Riz Ahmed, a relatively unknown stage and television actor in London. Many other candidates had the right look and the right voice, but only Riz was able to instill the role with the proper intelligence and worldlyness. Similarly, the main character of *Queen of Katwe* was a chess champion, and had to be played by someone whose expressions evoke in the viewer the feeling that the character is strategizing her next move on the chess board. Filming someone who is merely thinking required many takes and a transporting of emotional intelligence.

When working to identify and develop actors for your film, establishing trust is essential. Mira gained valuable practice in building trust as a documentary filmmaker, entering worlds as an outside observer and gradually earning her subjects' confidence. This experience informs her fiction, especially when working with non-actors who haven't yet learned the tricks of the trade. They often need a nurturing and feel safe enough to play the fool.

There is often a fascinating fusion that occurs when non-actors are paired with experienced actors. Non-actors are challenged to rise to professional standards, and professional actors are delighted and energized by the fresh, pure, and unprocessed performances of amateur talent. Children are the best examples of this, and a wonderful alchemy can often result from such mixed-ability casting.

Before casting for a non-actor to play an important role in your film, it is wise to test how well they cope with the pressures of production. When a camera, lights, crew, and other actors are added to the mix, can they still perform their lines well? Look for a casualness, comic timing, and lack of self-consciousness—even when surrounded by all the distractions of a busy set. When a film includes numerous roles for children, as was the case in *Salaam Bombay!*, Mira will hold several weeks of workshops with candidates. She conducts acting games and exercises in the early weeks, and then brings in the cameras. Participants learn about continuity, watch rehearsal footage of their performances, and strive for consistency while also avoiding posturing and artificiality. By the end of those intensive workshops, it will become clear who can rise to the challenge.

In some ways, finding and molding new talent can be easier for a first-time director than attracting big-name talent. Few things earn a professional actor's trust more than being able to see concrete evidence that you know what you are doing. Having a successful first film under your belt can prove to actors that you will do right by them, and they can entrust their performance to you. But if this is your first time helming a production, chances are the big name actors you approach will say no. Don't give up hope, though. As Mira herself found, the actors in your first film may be unknown—but you could be making them into stars.

DID YOU KNOW?

Mira mentions there were few casting directors in India when her career first started, but she found her collaborators in Uma Da Cunha, Dinaz Stafford, and Dilip Shankar, who share her discerning enthusiasm for discovering non-actors who have the mettle to share the screen with legendary actors.

ASSIGNMENT

Part 1: Prepare your casting call

Review your screenplay, pull out the names of each and every character (as well as unnamed roles and extras), and create a cast list. Identify your main characters, and think about the big-name stars who you imagine playing those roles. Who would be in your dream cast, if you had an unlimited budget and the influence of Spielberg?

Now, come back down to earth and translate the qualities of your dream cast into a description of the type of person you are looking for to inhabit each role. Brainstorm the personality traits, facial features, body type, mannerisms, and voice that you imagine for each character as they are written in the script. If it helps, skip forward to the lookbook activity in Chapter 12: Developing a Visual Palette, and gather photos from magazines and other sources of people who fit your mental image.

Next, identify the scene or moment from your script that best reveals each character's

essence. What actions or lines of dialogue are most crucial to identifying an actor who could embody that role? Note these scenes as potential excerpts to use during auditions.

Keep these notes handy for when you are ready to cast your film. When the time comes to post a casting call, write a short description of the key characteristics you are looking for in each role. (Try not to be too rigid in your specifications—leave wiggle room to be surprised by actors who stretch or challenge your expectations.) There are an overwhelming number of casting websites that you can use to post your audition opportunity, but below are four of the most reputable:

ACTORS ACCESS
Actors Access is a casting website that allows actors and casting agents to upload and view headshots, resumes, and reels. It is free to create an account, with the ability to purchase additional perks.

BACKSTAGE
Backstage is a long-established and trusted resource for actors and casting agents. They publish a weekly magazine and maintain a casting platform that includes a calendar of auditions, resources for industry insiders, and access to over thousands of roles being cast for projects across the United States.

CASTING FRONTIER
One of the better free casting websites, Casting Frontier is a digital platform that permits casting agents to upload audition materials and casting calls, and enables actors to upload a headshot and resume. You can upgrade to a paid membership plan for additional perks such as voice and video reels.

MANDY.COM
Known widely both inside and outside the industry, Mandy.com is a useful resource for casting. The site is entirely free, and facilitates the posting of job opportunities not only for performance talent, but for technical and production services as well. There is also a community forum where users can ask questions and share advice.

Part 2: Conduct your auditions
As you set up your space on audition day, think about ways to create a comfortable environment for your aspiring cast hopefuls. Make sure you have clear signage and that you have one or two staff members checking in actors, who are able to answer questions and give clear directions to the bathroom. Because auditions often run behind schedule, and actors tend to arrive at least 15 minutes before their scheduled time, provide amenities in the waiting room such as magazines, wi-fi access, bottled water, and snacks. Finally, designate one person on your team to guide actors from the waiting room to the audition space—never make them find their own way!

Make the audition room a safe, friendly, and inviting space. The guide who leads the actor into the room can also hand out the actor's headshot and resume and make the introductions. The goal is to offload any nerve-wracking procedural steps so the actor only has their performance to worry about.

Start with some small talk and light questioning about their resume. For instance, inquire about their experience on a previous film, or an interesting skill or hobby that they listed. You don't need to dedicate much more than one or two minutes to this type of conversation; the aim is simply to get a feel for the actor's personality and to reassure them that you're human too. Lastly,

ask whether they have any questions before they begin. This will give them the opportunity to resolve any confusion or hesitations they have about how to play the part, and will provide you with the chance to encourage them to make bold choices.

As you conduct each audition, look for the following qualities to an actor's performance:

Believable. Actors should create a convincing impression of a character actually going through the imagined scenario in their scene. Their performance should feel authentic.

Vulnerable. Characters are most interesting when they are being emotionally impacted by an experience, perhaps even at risk of failing or falling short of their goals. There should be a feeling to the performance that something real is at stake.

Collaborative. Look for clues that this person will be enjoyable to work with. Are they friendly, relaxed, and willing to experiment? Do they respond well to feedback, with positivity rather than frustration? Or do they complain and resist? Choose performers to work with who are willing to cooperate and join your team.

Authentic. Truth is often far more powerful and stronger than fiction, even in the casting process. Mira's training in the theater and working in the real streets compels her to cast people of similar background to her characters. She believes that the "map of life" is written on the faces of street children, so she vowed not to cast an upper class eucated child to play a character who has been exposed to the brutality of the streets.

After you feel you have fully explored possibilities with an actor, don't just leave them hanging. Share clear expectations about next steps: how to check out of the audition; how callbacks will work; when a final decision will be made; and how those who auditioned will be notified. Give them an opportunity to ask any final questions, and then thank them sincerely for their time and their effort.

LEARN MORE

If the budget for your first film can't support a casting director, it's time to learn the tricks of the trade yourself. *Casting Revealed: A Guide for Film Directors, 2nd Edition*, by Hester Schell (Routledge, 2016) is an insider manual on the art of casting. Learn industry standards for how to run auditions, draw up contracts, and make offers, and hear from casting directors about what to look for in a performance. Check out the companion website for even more resources to build your casting skill sets.

Mira's book *Salaam Bombay!* (Penguin Books, 1989) is a diary of how the award-winning film was made and cast. It serves as a helpful coaching manual for aspiring actors, as well as a behind-the-curtain peek at the skills, art, and craft of casting.

MIRA NAIR / CHAPTER SIX

DIRECTING ACTORS

"Create a haven, a cocoon, trust, fun, and a relationship. Nothing happens without that."

DIRECTING ACTORS

Subchapters

CHAPTER REVIEW

All actors, whether professional or not, need a safe space for risk-taking. There is no such thing as failure. . First-time actors especially need what Mira calls a "cocoon of safety," in which they can listen to what's going on inside of their character, and contemplate how best to access and produce those emotions. Sometimes a more experienced actor can facilitate the creation of that safe space. For instance, David Owelelo as coach Robert Katende in *Queen of Katwe* acted as a loving and protective father figure to the ensemble of children, both in the film and on set.

During the making of *Salaam Bombay!* the children affectionately called Mira "Kasku Didi" (Sister Tough Love). She is firm, but shows affection and concern for each child. She also knows that every child is different and responds to direction and instruction in a particular way. Because her films often involve sensitive and challenging issues, Mira often has to find ways to lead child actors to difficult emotional places. This involves an indirect path, where the situation represented in the scene is not confronted head on, but rather the child is asked to think about a memory or experience from their own life that gets them to a similar emotional space.

No fresh or honest performances can be achieved if you have not first established a trusting bond with the children in your film. Other directors, impressed by the young actors in *Salaam Bombay!*, have cast the same children and yet failed to coax equally powerful performances from them. They ask her, "What was the magic?" Mira explains is years of her work in her documentary work where she enters the lives of people to create an atmosphere of gaining their trust and mutual respect. You must invest real time, attention, and affection in earning their trust. Only then will your subjects be willing to share with you the boundless purity of emotion that only a child can give.

One of the most memorable scenes in *Salaam Bombay!* is when Chaipau, the tea boy, asks his young female friend, Manju to deliver a small package of biscuits to Sola Saal, the girl he loves—not knowing that Manju loves Chaipau. Manju does not deliver the biscuits, and instead she eats them herself, burning with jealousy. The scene is so unforgettable because in a single take, the girl devours all of the biscuits in the package, methodically chewing and swallowing them one by one. Mira gave the young actress a simple direction: "Eat the biscuits like you are eating Sola Saal." This simple prompt got through to her, and it got Mira exactly what she wanted—an act of jealousy and intentional sabotage. Think about similar tactics you can take for directing child actors in your own film. What prompt gets

through to them will depend on their personality and proclivities, and so you must know, understand, and create a bond with each performer.

Mira uses a variety of techniques to encourage trust and warmth between actors, no matter their experience level. For films like *Salaam Bombay!* and *Queen of Katwe* that mix actors of all ages, she relies on her remarkable collaborator Dinaz Stafford who holds extended workshops with her casts, beginning with a read-through of the script, and then continuing with trust exercises, theater games, and voice work. She finds that such group activities help to calm anxieties, lessen the ego, and bring everyone together as equals with a shared purpose.

Once a comfortable atmosphere has been established, the next step is to help children give honest and natural performances. Take care not to over-rehearse actual dialogue from the script, as children may lose freshness to their execution if they have to repeat their lines over and over again. Strive for spontaneity in front of the camera.

Additionally, give children training in any specialized skills they may need for their role, so they can perform naturally and effortlessly when the time comes. For instance, during workshops for *Queen of Katwe*, Mira brought in the real-life coach, Robert Katende, to engage her ensemble of children in the game of chess. By the time filming began, the children were so familiar and comfortable with chess that they were actually playing the game during takes, not just pretending.

Importantly, you need to create opportunities for children to develop relationships with the adult members of the cast. Those who play a mother or a coach in the film should also form a true connection with the children on the set. Early in workshops for *Queen of Katwe*, Mira had the children teach Lupita Nyong'o, who played the mother, how to cook Ugandan style. By the end of this bonding activity, the children were laughing and teasing Lupita, and a true family dynamic had been established.

Whomever you are directing, there will be times when you struggle to elicit the kind of performance you want. Resist the temptation to simply demonstrate what you want an actor to do, or to have them imitate you. That can lead to an inauthentic, borrowed quality. Instead, find a way to articulate what you're not getting. Mira made *Mississippi Masala* in a stupor of love, just after meeting her now-husband. The sentiment she was getting on screen, however, didn't feel quite as accurate. Mira drummed up the courage to share her feelings with Denzel. She told him if he could approximate the same feelings, the people in the audience would swoon. Denzel listened, and audiences fell in love.

Foreground characters with dialogue are of course central to bringing a film to life, but also crucial are the extras in the background. Second unit assistant directors who handle the blocking or choreography of extras play a hugely significant role in creating realistic environments for the main characters to inhabit. In the café scene woven throughout *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, for instance, unnamed characters engage in their own conversations at several other tables in the room. At one table, a group of girls are gossiping—and these extras had been given something real to talk about and do. Devise miniature scenarios for the extras in your own film, and strive to create a multifaceted tapestry of background action that reflects the variety and unpredictability of real life.

DID YOU KNOW?

Just as actors have acting coaches, there is actually such a thing as a directing coach. Instructor Judith Weston has taught workshops and classes for directors for three decades. You may have heard of some of her students, such as Ava DuVernay (director of *Selma*), Steve McQueen (director of *12 Years a Slave*) and Alejandro Iñárritu (director of *Birdman* and *The Revenant)*. Although her studio is now closed, she still guest teaches and consults one-on-one. A more affordable way to mine her wisdom is to read one or both of her books on the subject: *Directing Actors* (Michael Wiese Productions, 1999) and *The Film Director's Intuition* (Michael Wiese Productions, 2003). Both volumes offer in-depth advice on script analysis, rehearsal techniques, and channeling the relationship between director and actor.

ASSIGNMENT

The workshops that Mira conducts with her cast are filled with exercises and games. But what kinds of activities might they involve? An interesting source for simple yet powerful ways to engage your actors in fruitful experimentation is the classic book, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors, 2nd Edition*, by Augusto Boal (Routledge, 2002). Framed by a revolutionary theory that the author calls "Theater of the Oppressed," this book outlines a series of sensory techniques for attuning actors' muscular and spatial awareness, heightening their listening skills related to rhythm and respiration, and developing their understanding of how to use gestures, facial expressions, and body positions to compose meaningful images.

If you are looking at games specifically geared towards children, two classics in theater education are: *Theater Games for the Classroom: A Teacher's Handbook* by Viola Spolin (Northwestern University Press, 1986) and *Theatre Games for Young Performers: Improvisations and Exercises for Developing Acting Skills* by Maria C. Novelly (Meriwether Pub, 1985). Both of these have stood the test of time, and are filled with exercises exploring the basics of pantomime, voice control, rhythmic movement, monologues and dialogues. Consult any or all of these books for inspiration when planning your own rehearsals and warm-up exercises.

LEARN MORE

For a behind-the-scenes look at working with child actors, watch *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), a film about three Australian Aboriginal sisters who run away from a forced relocation camp, and find their way back home. All three girls who played these parts in the film began as non-actors, and went through a casting and workshop process much like what Mira describes in her own practice. The DVD contains an incredible 45-minute feature about the making of the film, called "*Following the Rabbit-Proof Fence*," which serves as a helpful model for anyone working with first-time child actors.

The documentary begins with director Phillip Noyce as he searches among hundreds of candidates for three girls to act in his film. It then shifts its focus to the girls he selects, following them through rigorous acting workshops and a difficult shoot, and then culminating in the filming of a wrenching abduction scene.

Discover how the director creates a nurturing environment for these girls—and at the same time challenges them to go to difficult and dark emotional places.

The viewing experience is made more powerful if you watch the fiction film first, but if you want to skip straight to the documentary, it has been made available by the Australian Aboriginal Documentary channel on YouTube.

ADDITIONAL VIEWING

The World Films Special Edition DVD of *Salaam Bombay!* (released in 2003) contains several retrospective featurettes that explore how the street kids who played parts in the film were affected by their experience, and what they grew up to become. Especially interesting are: "One Chance in a Million," about Shafiq Syed, who played the lead role of Chaipau and is now working as an assistant cameraperson; and "I Got Love," about Hansa Vithal, the girl who played Manju.

MIRA NAIR / CHAPTER SEVEN

DIRECTING GESTURES

"I want every frame to pulsate with life."

DIRECTING GESTURES

Subchapters

CHAPTER REVIEW

A sure sign of an inexperienced actor is that they don't know what to do with their hands. A character's emotions and motivations are often revealed through their gestures. But new performers are often unaware of how to translate these elements into bodily-kinesthetic actions. To help non-actors create organic, physical motions that serve the story, Mira closely observes, with a documentarian's eye, their real-life behaviors—their unique movements and 'tics.' She then works with them to devise gestures for their character that feel natural, not awkward, and distinctive.

Two examples of devising gestures from real behaviors come from *Salaam Bombay!*. Shafiq Syed, the street kid who played the role of Chaipau, the tea boy, had a habit of holding a hand behind his ear when confused or lost in thought. Mira loved that gesture and what his calloused palms revealed about his rough life. She asked him to make that same gesture in scenes where his character gets in trouble with his boss. It was a small, subtle way to underline those moments, and completely organic to Shafiq's natural proclivities. Similarly, the young actress who played Manju had an endearing habit of winking saucily. Mira asked her to pull this expression out during a dance scene, to lend that same sauciness to her character during the dancing scene.

Gestures should ideally help the audience to distinguish one character from another. But sometimes, shared gestures can create a feeling of group cohesion. The perfect example of this is the finger snap from *Queen of Katwe*. This was a Ugandan gesture that all the children on set were already in the habit of making, and so Mira embraced and channeled that motion into a meaningful motif. The finger snap served as a way to say "touché" during a chess match. Mira used it as a cutting point for editing as well, and despite the producer cautioning her that she was calling for the gesture too often, the finger snap became a memorable and catchy aspect of the final film. In fact the publicity of the film shows Lupita teaching the finger snap as it became a rage.

To retain the spontaneous, organic nature of gestures during filming, Mira will often call out for certain actions in the moment, even if it means that her voice needs to be removed during the sound mix. In *Monsoon Wedding*, for instance, there is a tense scene when the characters all pose for a group photograph, following a startling and public revelation of incest. Seeking always to balance dark moments with lightness, Mira called out for one of the young actors to make his trademark, wide-eyed eyebrow raise—an expression that Mira knew he liked to make in real life, but that would serve to subtly break the tension in the scene.

Don't hesitate to simply ask your actors to make specific gestures, as long as they come from

within. Try not to impose a gesture that you have devised on to your actor who might feel the gesture is not truthful to his or her character.. As Mira explains, you are simply asking for something that a person would normally do, but with your own timing. In other situations, you may actually want to hold back from specifying a gesture, and see what the actor does spontaneously given a description of their character's motivations. For one scene involving prostitution in *Salaam Bombay!*, the content was too mature to explain to the girl playing Manju. Instead, Mira simply told the young actress that "you want to play with your mother, and she's not there." The young girl's luminous eyes, and the shadows in the hallway, did the necessary mood setting.

Mira shares several examples of scenes in *Monsoon Wedding* where she planned and choreographed gestures far in advance of the shoot, largely because they were crucial to planting certain seeds in the plot that would pay off later. What's more, these gestures needed to be paired with specific camera movements to reveal something subtle but important to the audience. For instance, panning from a man's hand touching a woman's fingers up to the woman's face reveals a budding flirtation. Or a woman freezes rigidly in reaction to a man's offer to pay for her education, but nobody else notices her negative response. These are gestures that reveal character, and trigger questions and expectations for the audience as the story develops.

ASSIGNMENTS

Mira describes how her experience in documentary film taught her to become a keen observer of real-life behaviors. Practice your own observation skills, and begin developing your eye for spotting interesting gestures, body movements, and expressions. Set aside some time—a half-hour or so—to observe people in a public gathering spot. This could be a café, a park, a city square, or a busy intersection. Find a place to sit, unfold a newspaper, and pretend to be absent-mindedly enjoying the day. (But in today's digital age people spend more time looking at their phones than with each other. Put the phone away and engage with life.) Study the people who walk past or who are engaged in conversation nearby. Take note of their non-verbal behaviors, including their facial expressions, their body posture when they walk or sit, what they do with their hands, how they listen and react, and other wordless signals that they use. Are they making eye contact? What is their face showing? Are their shoulders stiff or relaxed? Do they look confident, stressed, or interested? Journal about your observations, and take special note of gestures that were especially memorable, and that seemed to have significance or meaning. If you were casting extras for a scene in your film, which of the people that you observed would you hire? Which of their gestures would you like them to make again, and for what purpose? Train your mind to think in gestures—and transfer this process of observation and application to rehearsals with your actors.

LEARN MORE

For inspiration about how to use gesture in your films, page through *Speaking With Hands*, by Jennifer Blessing, Kirsten Hoving, and Ralph Rugoff (Guggenheim Museum, 2004). This beautiful coffee table book shares the photographs of art collector Henry M. Buhl, who became obsessed with hands. His private collection of more than 1,000 photos contains beautiful, poetic, and striking imagery of fingers, hands, and gestures. The best are included in this catalog, and should get your creative gears turning for how to think about gesture in your own cinematic explorations.

MIRA NAIR / CHAPTER EIGHT

SCENE WORKSHOP, PART 1: READ-THROUGH AND BLOCKING

SCENE WORKSHOP: PART 1: SECOND REHEARSAL

CHAPTER REVIEW

Although production of *Queen of Katwe* wrapped in 2015, Mira has recreated a scene workshop exclusively for MasterClass. Young actress Madina Nalwanga reprises her role as chess prodigy Phiona Mutesi, and veteran Ugandan actor Philip Luswata plays the role of chess coach Robert Katende (originally played by David Oyelowo). In cinema, rehearsals often involve not only the actors, but the cinematographer as well. So Miles Goodall, an additional photographer for *Queen of Katwe*, is also participating with his camera.

The scene takes place in Russia, following Phiona's defeat at an international chess championship. Devastated, Phiona has fled the arena and her coach finds her outside, weeping. As you watch each stage of this scene workshop, take note of Mira's directorial approach and think about how you envision your own style for working with actors.

Before rehearsals begin, make sure that you have spent quality time getting to know your actors, engaging in exercises with them, and building a relationship of trust. This is especially true for young, first-time performers. Begin by talking together about each character's motivations and feelings (although you should save the real emotional work for later). Next, work out the movement of the performers through space, and concurrently experiment with the placement and framing of the camera in relation to the performers. This process of 'blocking' is essentially an act of choreography, where every action is motivated by something the characters think, feel, want, or need. It is simultaneously an act of composition, where appropriate frames and camera angles are chosen so as to accentuate the emotional themes of the story.

For your first scene rehearsal, your actors should have their lines memorized. Work with them to discover what motivates each moment. In any given scene, there are a number of individual 'beats,' where one emotion shifts to another, and the dramatic action shifts in response. Find those beats, and work with your actors to understand their progression. Inexperienced actors may need to be reminded to say the lines as if they are grappling with their feelings, and don't know what they're going to say next. The underlying emotions of the character are what should motivate each line of dialogue, not the simple fact that "this is what the script says next." Achieving that authenticity requires an exploration of internal feelings and processes, and it is the director's task to facilitate the discovery of those emotions.

MIRA NAIR / CHAPTER NINE

SCENE WORKSHOP, PART 2: REHEARSING THE SCENE

SCENE WORKSHOP, PART 2: REHEARSING THE SCENE

CHAPTER REVIEW

As actors grow more familiar with their character's inner life, the blocking for your scene will likely change and evolve. Emotions produce gestures, and those gestures must be captured on camera in a way that reflects and enhances the drama of the scene. You therefore need to both direct the actors, as well as the camera in relation to the actors. The framing for a shot of a character crying out "I do not belong here!" will be different depending on whether the character is pleading directly to another character, or shouting to the heavens to no one in particular. The process will involve considerable give-and-take, as the cinematographer adjusts the camera in response to a particular gesture or action, and as actors adjusts their body position and blocking to better fit the framing of a shot. All the while, try to maintain flexibility and openness to your team's instincts, and allow for unexpected discoveries.

MIRA NAIR / CHAPTER TEN

SCENE WORKSHOP, PART 3: FINAL TAKE

SCENE WORKSHOP, PART 3: FINAL TAKE

CHAPTER REVIEW

Certain scenes will require that an actor go into a very difficult or dark place, in order to do justice to the emotions their character is experiencing. For these moments, it can help to take your actor aside, offer some privacy, and help them find a way to access those emotions within themselves. For example, the moment in *Queen of Katwe* when Phiona loses the chess match is one in which she feels overwhelming shame and regret. Mira spends five minutes talking through those emotions with actress Madina Nalwanga, asking her to remember a time when she herself felt similarly—a moment "when you wanted something and you worked for it really hard and it was taken away from you. Not just taken away from you quietly, but taken away from you in front of everyone." There's no single right way to access such emotions, and Madina doesn't share with Mira the memory from her own past that made her feel this way. The important thing is that she remembers something, anything, which helps her transfer that emotion into the scene. In the same way, work with your own actors to unlock and express their character's emotional journey.

This is the moment you've been building up to, the final take. You've worked out the blocking, the emotional beats, and the camera placement. Now is the time to go for broke. If the scene is an emotional one, encourage your actors to let themselves go—to shout, to cry, to forget all about how they look or sound. Have them do whatever it takes to get there, whether that is running in place to get their breath up, or even yelling and screaming at each other to supercharge their emotions. The goal of the final take is to get to the truth of the scene and achieve real honesty. If you have done your job well as a director, then you have built up a level of trust with your actors and enabled them to produce an amazing performance.

MIRA NAIR / CHAPTER ELEVEN

TELLING THE STORY: MONSOON WEDDING

"The more local your story, the more surprisingly universal it becomes."

TELLING THE STORY: MOONSOON WEDDING

Subchapters

CHAPTER REVIEW

To make a film that has universal appeal, you might think your story needs to be generic, with the kind of one-size-fits-all approach seen in many Hollywood movies. But Mira's film, *Monsoon Wedding,* proves that the more specific, local, and honest your story is, the more potential it has to succeed universally.

From the start, Mira conceived of the film as a low-budget experiment that would nevertheless have a populist heart. She was inspired by Bollywood wedding movies, but wanted to depict what a 'real' Punjabi wedding is like. And to show most families have secrets and drama. Mira's desire was to explore five kinds of love—passionate love, The love that can be borne from an arranged marriage, the first time love, the non-material love symbolized by the marigold, and incest, and a form of twisted love. The project would be an ensemble film, with parallel 'upstairs-downstairs' storylines of an upper class family and the servants who organize their wedding.

Turning this ambitious idea into a screenplay was by no means easy. The first draft was a long-winded 184 pages, and impossible to shoot in the allotted time. Half a dozen story threads had to be condensed and tightly interwoven. In such circumstances, it can be helpful to map a screenplay onto a series of index cards, mount them onto a board, and experiment with structure. What scenes can be fused together? Can any locations be combined into one? Are there any story beats that can be cut completely? Mira used this technique for *Monsoon Wedding*, spreading her cards out on the very bed that she slept in.

At one point in her index card experimentation, Mira tried removing the entire incest and abuse theme, on the advice of several people who expressed doubts that such darkness wasn't appropriate for an otherwise joyful story. What remained, however, felt like 'fluff' to Mira. The story had no conflict, and conflict is necessary for drama. Preserve the darker themes in your own script, and give yourself the raw material you need in the edit room, where you can shape and balance the emotional elements of your story.

In an ensemble film like *Monsoon Wedding*, where multiple characters and subplots must blend and interlock, it is important that every scene fulfills a dual purpose, realizing both the intention of the current moment, as well as the dramatic needs of the larger story. Your film should have a clear through line that every scene feeds into and supports in a three-dimensional way, adding as much nuance as possible within the allotted screen time. Mira cites two scenes that successfully 'do more than one thing' in her film.

When the father of the bride threatens to send his son to boarding school, the moment is elevated beyond a domestic conflict by seeing the regret on his face after the fight ends. The

father, in his anguish, becomes more human, and the audience is subtly prepared for a moment at the end of the film when the father responds to regret in a very different way.

The financial pressures on the father of the bride are subtly introduced in a scene where he is struggling to balance his accounts, and then later reinforced when he asks his golf-mates to borrow a considerable sum of money. This makes the audience understand how great his need is, which later makes it clear why he feels so indebted to his brother-in-law for offering to pay for his niece's education. This carefully planned sequence of moments finally pays off as a larger plot unfolds, and it is revealed that the brother-in-law has sexually abused the niece. By the time the father takes the enormous step of banishing his brother-in-law despite the financial consequences, the audience feels incredible empathy for how difficult that decision must have been.

Such rigorous streamlining of the story paid clear dividends. When Mira showed the unfinished film to international distributors at Cannes Film Festival in France, everyone wanted to buy it. People recognized their own family in the film, and felt as though the characters were real, personable, and memorable. *Monsoon Wedding* had touched something universal in audiences, and would soon become a worldwide hit.

DID YOU KNOW?

Mira references the Dogme 95 movement, which originated in Denmark, especially *Festen* which was a direct inspiration for her experimental approach to *Monsoon Wedding*. Danish directors Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg created a manifesto in 1995 that proposed a set of rules for filmmaking that were intended to reduce the influence of studios, and return creative control back to the director as artist. Hand-held camera movement, sync sound, filming on location, and a lack of special effects or modifications in postproduction, all characterized the 95's raw and unconventional style.

Watch Lars von Trier's seminal film, *Breaking the Waves* (1996). Actress Emily Watson was nominated for an Oscar for her wrenching performance as a newlywed whose husband is paralyzed in an oil rig accident. Although not officially a Dogme film, *Breaking the Waves* was widely seen around the world, and spurred a new wave of independent filmmakers like Mira, who emulated its restless energy and low-tech style.

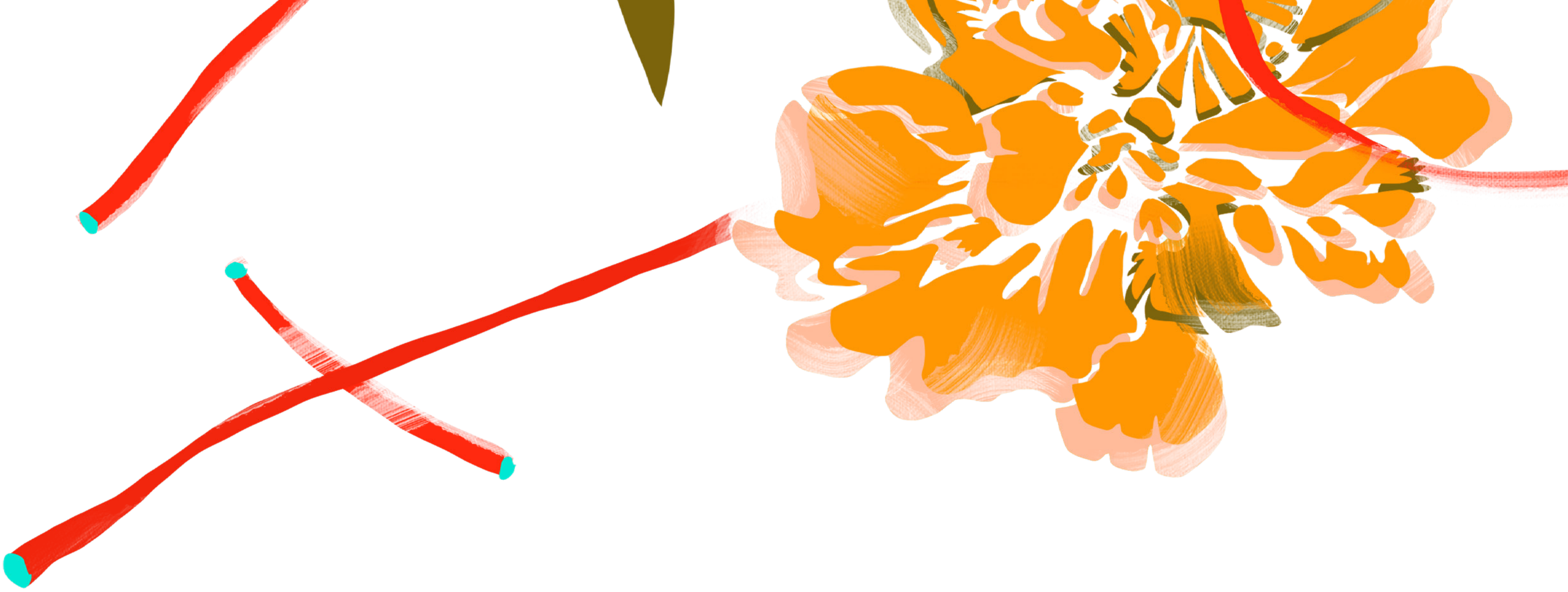
ASSIGNMENT

Whether you have a first draft of a screenplay, or haven't started writing yet, the index card method that Mira describes is a great exercise to try out for your self. Write down each scene (or potential scene) of your film on an individual 3x5 inch note card. You may want to experiment with using differently colored cards to signify recurring characters, locations, or themes. Next, arrange these cards in the current or proposed order for your film, and tape or pin them on a board for you to study and discuss with others.

The resulting board becomes an incredibly valuable tool in structuring and tightening your script. The index card array translates the linear, time-based medium of film into an instantly visible reference, almost like a table of contents. Moveable note cards make story structure flexible and easy to manipulate. They can help you streamline your main narrative

thread, consolidate locations, identify repetitive moments, and ensure that each scene builds sequentially to a greater payoff later in the story. Keep this board handy throughout the script-writing process, rearranging the note cards as you go, and experimenting with possible fixes.

If you prefer to work digitally, the same screenwriting applications listed in Chapter 3: Finding the Story also feature index card and scene views of your script. Again, these include high-end tools like Final Draft or Movie Magic Screenwriter, as well as less expensive alternatives Fade In and Celtx. If you're not ready to invest in software, try the free, cloud-based Amazon Storybuilder, which mimics the process of pinning note cards to a virtual 'corkboard.'



MIRA NAIR / CHAPTER TWELVE

DEVELOPING A VISUAL PALETTE

"Let the heart inform the brain. Prepare, communicate, but at the moment of working, be open to inspiration from any quarter: A carpenter, a streetchild, the light of the moon."



DEVELOPING A VISUAL PALETTE

Subchapters

- Have a Point of View
- Prepare a Lookbook and Manifesto
- Share Every Possible Reference
- Work With People Who Take You Further
- Maximize Your Locations
- Use Color to Heighten the Intention

CHAPTER REVIEW

Film is a visual medium. Just as you invested time and thought into developing your unique voice as a storyteller, you should also cultivate a distinct aesthetic for the design and composition of your films.

India, when it is represented at all, it often syncs into stereotypes; loud colours, gaudy costumes, exotic clichés. India is a land of an extremely refined visual sensibility where every colour has a meaning, for example if you see a character wearing white it is assumed by the audience that she may be a widow. For instance when Mira was making *The Namesake* wedding scene she chose as a base colour the sari 'Dhakai Jamdani' as the reference point for all the other saris worn in that scene by various other characters. These colours included pink, red and white. Her costume designer, Arjun Bhasin, designed pink, red, and white saris for the wedding in *The Namesake*.

Communicate your color palette to your entire cast and crew, so that all participants are aware of your film's intended aesthetic. In *Monsoon Wedding*, not having the budget to cloth all extras to certain palette, Mira created her visual palette of indigo, ochre and crimson and asked extras to bring their clothes that fit this palette.

In her film *The Namesake*, Mira's team used a process called 'bleach bypass' to drain most color from the image, while certain other colors, such as red, pop out in. This choice was made to enhance the contrast between a Bengali immigrant in her vibrant red sari, and her new surroundings—the icy, dreary palette of New York in winter. Sometimes colors can be enhanced after the fact, in postproduction, in order to heighten certain dramatic themes.

A great way to communicate your intended aesthetic for a film is to prepare a lookbook, or a collection of photographs and images that express your vision. Throughout preproduction, gather together visual references that inspire you, and that feel relevant to certain moods and moments in the script. Organize them in a binder for your production designer, costumer, and cinematographer to study and align with their own design process. Ideally, these collaborators should share your sensibility, but also contribute ideas and reference images of their own that support and extend your vision.

Truly, there is no limit to the influences that you can and should share with your creative team. Mira writes a full page of thoughts for each frame, conveying how she wants a frame to look and feel. She may reference pieces of music, the way lighting is used in a photo for a magazine advertisement, or even a text from the sixteenth century that delineated the meaning of different colors in India at the time. When filming *Monsoon Wedding*, she shared 1950's classics with the actress who portrayed Alice in order to

show her the kind of 'sweetness' that she wanted to evoke in the generator scene. She showed her assistant directors, often first-timers, Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*, with its intricate background action, in preparation for choreography of complex and unpredictable crowd scenes.

Every step of the way, Mira remains open to inspiration and relies on her hand-picked creative team to always take her a step further. During the making of *Monsoon Wedding*, two anecdotes illustrate the kind of 'planned serendipity' that enabled her to maximize locations in the film. Although *Monsoon Wedding* was alternative to Bollywood film, weddings in India have become more Bollywood-ised and often contain a spectacular dance number (popularly known as "item number"). Although *Monsoon Wedding* was made on a budget of an experimental film, Mira didn't want to set the "item number" in a spectacular setting. At a party in Delhi, she came upon a Gaudi-esque mosaic grotto pool, and knew this would be the setting for a glamorous song and dance sequence without apology and with aplomb. But since the pool was far from their actual shoot location, Mira's production designer, Stephanie Carrolll, devised a unifying motif of decorative neon lights to make the pool appear 'of a piece' with the rest of the set. In another instance, Mira sought out a location depicted in a photo by Raghu Rai that she had fallen in love with, of a woman praying on a terrace, with the expanse of Old Delhi before her—children flying kites on rooftops, a mosque in the distance, and the open sky beyond. This real life location became the perfect vista for the character of Dubey, the tent man, to return home—longing for the woman he thinks he has lost.

Your collaborators are key to the process of shaping your vision. Share with them any and every reference that inspires you, and then give them free rein. The best collaborators are not "yes people." Rather, they synchronize their vision with yours, and take it even further.

LEARN MORE

Discover the color palettes of famous movies via the websites Movies in Color and The Colors of Motion, both created by hobbyists, but both still very informative and fun to explore. The former presents well-composed and vibrant stills from famous films, and then breaks out into a spectrum the most prominent color samples, or swatches. The later utilizes a different approach, sampling frames at regular intervals throughout the movie, calculating the average color of each frame, and then stacking those colors sequentially from beginning to end. The result is a unique color fingerprint for each film. Each of these websites takes requests; so if there is a movie you want to see visualized, reach out to the provided contact!

Many color choices in a film are made during production, but plenty more are made during postproduction, during a process called color grading. If you want to get into the nitty-gritty of digital color correction, read the *Color Correction Handbook: Professional Techniques for Video and Cinema* (2nd Edition), by Alexis Van Hurkman (Peachpit Press 2013). This technical guidebook uses real examples to demonstrate how colorists can use modern software to stylize and refine the cinematic visuals. Mira also suggests that you look at the works by Raghubir Singh, William Eggleston, Alex Webb, Mitch Epstein, Nan Goldin and Ketaki Sheth to stimulate ideas on colour palette.

For a more basic introduction to the use of color in film, check out this free e-book made available by StudioBinder.

ASSIGNMENT

A lookbook is both a visual pitch for your film, and a way to convey to collaborators the look and feel that you want your film to have. Whether you are just at the idea stage or already have a screenplay in hand, you can clarify your vision and aesthetic by gathering imagery that evokes imagined moments, moods, and other aspects of your film.

Start by examining your script (or plumbing your imagination) for visual details about your characters, scenes, and environments. List anything and everything that will make an impression on screen, and then search for images that have a similar impact. The sources you can consult are limitless—explore back issues of magazines, newspapers, Pinterest, Google Images, stock photography websites, coffee table books, archives like the Library of Congress, and more. Anything that inspires you is fair game. Download images that you find online, cut images from magazines or books that you own, and take color photographs of anything you don't.

You will end up with a huge number of images. Cull them down, organize them, and then choose whether you want to work with your hands or with a computer. If you think well with physical collages, print everything and spread it all out on the floor. If you prefer mood board software, import everything and begin to play.

As you create your lookbook, try to find images for each of the following categories:

OVERALL TONE AND STYLE: What two or three images best represent your film overall? What would you share with your marketing department as inspiration for the film's poster and other advertising?

CHARACTERS: Who are the main or most striking characters in your script? Find likenesses that match what you might look for when casting each of those roles. Think about a character's age and personality, and try to capture their 'essence.'

LOCATIONS: What places or environments will your characters inhabit? Where will key scenes be set? Collect landscapes and interiors from life, or from imagined worlds, that evoke the world of your film.

COLOR PALETTES: What colors would you like to use to build this world? Choose photos or works of art along the color spectrum you imagine for the film, even if the imagery does not literally correspond with your film's plot.

LIGHTING: Lighting is often the tool that conveys mood most clearly. What images evoke the play of light and shadow that you envision for your film?

MUSIC: What will your film's score sound like? Select specific pieces of music that establish the atmosphere of the film, or that could serve as the theme for your main protagonist.

The lookbook is, in a sense, your manifesto for the visual design of your motion picture. Share this manifesto with your team—but at the same time, know that it is merely a starting point. The look and feel of your film will evolve, as each collaborator brings their own sensibilities and inspirations to the table. Although the final product may bear only a faint resemblance to the original lookbook, the process is essential to arriving at a coherent, unified, and inspired design.

MIRA NAIR / CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ON-SET DIRECTING

"Energy is not limitless. And creative energy is limited. It's not something that has an endless flow, you know. Preserve that creative energy. Do not lose your cool."

ON-SET DIRECTING

Subchapters

- Prepare Rigorously to Create Life on Set
- Create a Sense of Harmony
- Preserve Silence and Sanctity
- Conserve Your Creative Energy
- Rely on Your AD
- Know What Each Department Does
- Be Humble About What You Don't Know
- Have the Bravery to Change

CHAPTER REVIEW

Directors of low-budget films cannot afford to figure things out during the shoot. Rather, you should prepare for on-set production so thoroughly and rigorously that shooting itself becomes the easiest step of the process. This was Mira's experience on the set of *Monsoon Wedding*. All exploration, communication, and problem solving with the cast and crew had taken place weeks before the cameras rolled. By the time filming began, there was an incredible sense of energy and readiness in her team. The actors felt like they were truly part of a family, and the cameras felt familiar and non-intrusive. When Mira watched the dailies, she realized that she had achieved a kind of magic.

An active film set is an extremely high-stress environment, and the pressure on a first-time director can be overwhelming. Cultivate stamina. Try not to lose your cool. Yelling at your crew may feel satisfying, but ultimately you are transferring pressure and negativity to those who can help you, and will feel regret and embarrassment soon after. Conserve your energy, and find other ways to deal with the stress. Eat a quiet lunch away from the chaos; take a power nap; being on set is not a popularity contest.

Mira learned mid-way through her career that she needed to prevent burnout. She turned to yoga, which gave her both physical elasticity and mental equilibrium. Her practice became so important to her that Mira added a yoga instructor to her crew, who offered a voluntary hour of stretching and concentration at the start of each production day. This brought her entire team together in a common activity, and introduced a democratic element where a carpenter could be stretched out on a yoga mat next to a movie star. Yoga creates a sense of friendship and harmony on set that Mira finds to be extremely valuable.

You do not need to seek personal friendships with those on your team—after all, you are there to get a job done. Rather, seek to preserve a focused silence, to minimize chaos on set, to inspire your team, and to achieve a state of readiness where you can maximize each moment on set. To do this, try to engage directly with your actors, even while the camera is rolling, so there is no separation between you and the performance. Rely on your collaborators to take care of the rest. Your script supervisor can monitor the framing of a shot, and your assistant director can coordinate small details like hair and makeup, or communication with various crewmembers. Delegate the small stuff to those you trust, and preserve your creative energy for looking holistically at a scene, and bringing the script to life.

Your creative partners are vital to on set directing. Become intimately acquainted with what they offer to the process. If this is your first film, embrace the fact that you are doing everything yourself. Exhausting as it may be, you are gaining pragmatic knowledge of the different dimensions of filmmaking. As your career progresses, you will be able to partner with a producer who will help you fundraise, an assistant director who will coordinate the background casting and action, and a unit production manager who will take care of budgeting and scheduling. But because of your earlier solo experiences, you will know the factors to consider and the language for how to communicate with each collaborator. This became crucial for Mira on the set of *Vanity Fair*, when her cinematographer became violently ill on a day when 500 extras were present. Because Mira had pre-planned so thoroughly with her cinematographer, she was able to find a replacement within hours, and clearly communicate the needed camera set-up for each shot.

There is, however, such a thing as micromanaging. Trust your key collaborators to form their own teams, and don't get in the way. What to tell a gaffer is the cinematographer's responsibility, not yours. Communicate your vision to your partners, and they will work with their own teams to make it happen. If you treat them with humility and respect, and give them the space to exercise their talents, the best partners will take your ideas even further than you imagined.

One of the hardest decisions that directors face is what to do when you realize that you're wrong. Mira rarely has the luxury of being able to reshoot scenes that turned out weak in the edit room. So she feels an "exquisite terror" on set when she has placed the camera, set up the lighting, readied the actors, and then realizes that something isn't working. There are two things you can do in such situations: you can suppress the horror and call "action" anyways, or you can listen to your instinct and revise the plan. What Mira realized is that the same thing that bothers her on set will also bother her later in the edit room, when it is too late to change anything. Have the bravery to change your plans on set in the moment, rather than regret not having listened to your gut. Your creative instinct as a director is what makes you distinctive. Listen to that instinct, follow its lead, and change what is necessary on set in order to fully realize your vision. One of Mira's mantras; be clear about what you know, be equally humble about what you don't know.

ASSIGNMENT

When it comes to preventing burnout on set, yoga works for Mira, but it might not work for you. Take a moment to think about what might help you relax and release stress during a difficult shoot. You know yourself best—do you benefit from deep breathing? Taking a brisk walk? Closing your eyes and listening to music? Figure out a go-to routine for calming down that you schedule into each day of your shoot, whether it is exercising an hour before call-time, escaping during the lunch hour, or engaging in a micro-activity during each break. Have a plan for how to avoid breaking down or lashing out on set, and incorporate that strategy into your day-to-day directorial approach.

LEARN MORE

Unless you went to film school or have already worked extensively on movie sets, you probably need to get better acquainted with the various roles and responsibilities of crew and production staff before directing your first film. For a crash

course on who's who on a film set, try consulting any or all of the following resources:

Although this article from Backstage.com is geared towards people hoping to get a job on set, it serves as a great introduction for first-time directors as well, outlining what each crew-member does and why their role is important. And if you happen to be looking for a crew job yourself, it offers some great career tips.

Media Match is a networking site for those in the film and television industry who are seeking and hiring freelance crew positions. Their list of job descriptions provides a thorough overview of the responsibilities of each potential crewmember, and then links to actual job opportunities on the site's jobs board.

If you want to explore the various aspects of the film industry in more depth, consult the following books:

Hollywood 101: The Film Industry by Frederick Levy (Renaissance Books, 2000) breaks down the hierarchies of the film industry and gives practical advice for what success means in each role, from writing, directing, and producing, to agents, publicists, and personal assistants.

Movie Speak: How to Talk Like You Belong on a Film Set by Tony Bill (Workman Publishing Company, 2009) explores 'the secret language of movie-making' by providing an exhaustive list of technical terms, lingo, and unspoken etiquette. The aim of the book is to help those breaking into the film business to talk the talk, feel less like outsiders, and act more like they are part of the culture.

MIRA NAIR / CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WORKING WITH YOUR CINEMATOGRAPHER

"I work with people who are artists of light."

WORKING WITH YOUR CINEMATOGRAPHER

Subchapters

CHAPTER REVIEW

When Mira finds a great cinematographer, she tends to stick with them. She has worked with director of photography Declan Quinn, on six different projects, including *Monsoon Wedding*. Cinematographers are close collaborators on Mira's films, joining the team early and helping to shape and take her vision even further. They must have an awareness, comfort, and even love for other worlds, and treat their framing of those worlds with sacredness and poetry.

To find the right cinematographer for your own film, look first at the quality of their previous work. Next, approach and talk to them extensively about your own visual sensibilities. Share your previous work with them, and discuss the lookbook that you have created for your current project. If those conversations seem promising, then share the script with them next. As you dig into the storytelling possibilities together, make sure you feel an affinity for their ideas, and that your personalities complement each other well. Do they excite you with the way they speak about your film? You will be spending grueling, 15-hour days together in the trenches of filmmaking. Make sure you can keep each other inspired.

Lighting is the domain of the cinematographer. Trust them to take your visual ideas and run with them. Mira herself 'surrenders' lighting to the photography department, knowing that it is not her area of expertise. Yet she still shares her visual inspirations and associations with her cinematographer. For instance, Mira has vivid memories of being home alone as a child, and then seeing the headlights of her parents' car sweep across her room as it rolled into the driveway. This was the image she conveyed to her director of photography, Sandi Sissell, for *Salaam Bombay!*, specifically in connection with a scene when the girl Manju is waiting in the hallway for her mother's client to leave. The cinematographer created a lighting set-up which cast haunting shadows on the wall behind Manju, masterfully informing the audience of a struggle between light and dark happening in the character's own heart.

For low-budget films, an additional quality to look for in a cinematographer is an ability to devise non-traditional, economic, and innovative ways to collect coverage. Set aside a significant chunk of time in your schedule to scout every location with your cinematographer, seeking ways to streamline and consolidate the building blocks of each scene. Traditional coverage of a scene, for instance, might call for 18 different set-ups. But with your limited budget, how could you cover the same essential beats of the story in a more fluid, dynamic way that requires only nine set-ups?

Monsoon Wedding serves as a perfect case study for how to work productively with your director of photography. Declan Quinn shot the entire film with a hand-held camera, and the action was blocked with the actors knowing that the camera could land on them at any moment. Declan and Mira agreed that for this film, hand-held would not mean jagged or dizzying. Rather, the style would be fluid, and the camera would explore the connections between characters almost as though it were an observer of the action. For example, during a scene when the whole family is posing for a group photo, the camera links two characters together in a subliminally powerful way. Ria, who has been asked by an unknowing wedding photographer to sit at the feet of her abuser, looks up at her uncle who was supposed to protect her. The pained expression on Ria's face, and the motion of her eyes up to her uncle, betray a powerful subtext that was neither scripted nor spoken by any character. Yet the audience notices this dynamic, thanks to the subtle movements of the camera.

In contrast, *The Namesake* was filmed in a completely different style than *Monsoon Wedding*, without any hand-held camera work at all. Mira wanted something very different for this film, and she turned to cinematographer Frederick Elmes, who frequently collaborates with David Lynch. They drew inspiration from the work of the Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky and two great Bengali directors, Ritwik Ghatak and Satyajit Ray, as well as the photography of Dayanita Singh, Garry Winogrand, and Derry Moore. Extreme close-ups would dominate the style of *The Namesake*, which Elmes shot almost like a series of still life photographs.

Another example of the power of light and shadow comes from *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. The film opens with an eight-minute musical performance at a private party, interwoven with fragments of a hijacking scene somewhere in the surrounding city. The sequence alternates between Kavali singing in exaltation to the gods, and the impending danger of the kidnapping. Throughout, Mira and her cinematographer Declan Quinn play with light and shadow. The torchlight at the party conveys vigor and wildness, informing the murky circumstances of the hijacking, which is cloaked in shadow. The complex interplay was largely accomplished in editing, and music played a vital role in weaving these elements together. But the vision for the film's opening was originally conceived in discussion and deep collaboration with the cinematographer.

LEARN MORE

Take a deep dive into the craft of cinematography by exploring the following resources:

On the Web. Videomaker is an online magazine with an educational mission. The site provides objective reviews and buyer's guides for products such as cameras, lenses, tripods, and much more, to help filmmakers find the right technology for their projects. They also publish helpful instructional videos and articles such as this one, which provides a breakdown of essential personnel as well as pragmatic tips for where to find and how to choose crew—such as a director of photography for your film.

Films. Learn about the artistry of cinematography by watching the documentary *Visions of Light* (1992). Although somewhat dated, the film explores the history of cinematic styles with examples from over 100 films, beginning with *Birth of a Nation* and continuing up to Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*. For a more recent essay on cinematography, watch *Side by Side* (2012), hosted by Keanu Reeves. Perfect for

movie geeks, this documentary investigates the development of digital technology and its impact on cinema, through interviews with Hollywood greats such as Martin Scorsese, Steven Soderbergh, David Lynch, and James Cameron.

Books. To learn some basic principles for cinematic composition and storytelling, read *The Filmmaker's Eye: Learning (and Breaking) the Rules of Cinematic Composition* by Gustavo Mercado (Focal Press, 2010). This unique guide deconstructs full-color examples from actual films, explaining why particular types of shots work, how each shot accomplishes its effect, and the techniques and technology needed make it all happen. For a more advanced textbook on the visual craft of filmmaking, check out Blain Brown's *Cinematography: Theory and Practice: Image Making for Cinematographers and Directors, Volume 3* (Routledge, 2016). This text, which is required reading in many film schools, breaks down how each visual element that appears on screen can serve and enhance the story.

Without good lighting, the best camera in the world can't capture a perfect picture. Learn how to enhance an image's depth, contrast, and contour, and support your story's mood and atmosphere with *Lighting for Cinematography: A Practical Guide to the Art and Craft of Lighting for the Moving Image* by David Landau (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014). Fourteen chapters, structured like a semester-long film school course, guide readers through a wide range of techniques and considerations, and provide diagrams, advice, and practical exercises to help demystify the craft of lighting design.

ASSIGNMENT

Mira describes two very different styles of cinematography used in her films *Monsoon Wedding* and *The Namesake*. What style is right for your own project?

One of the best ways to discover the right cinematic approach for your film is simply to watch a wide variety of movies in search of a style that matches or approximates your own vision. To accelerate the process, check out this 'supercut' compilation of every Best Cinematography Oscar winner from 1927 to 2015 (including the nominees from 2016). The embedded video highlights a stunning image from each image from each film, with the names and years listed below.

Rent, borrow, or stream at least three of the movies that catch your attention—not for being beautiful, but for resonating with the tone you want to strike in your own film. Refer to moments, shots, and scenes from these films, both when interviewing and selecting potential directors of photography, and when discussing cinematic possibilities with your chosen collaborator.

Lighting is a specialized skill, and therefore a director will typically defer supervision of the lighting design to the director of photography. However, if you want to gain hands-on experience and learn some basics, start with mastering three-point lighting, which is used to highlight the main actor or subject of your scene.

Place your main and strongest source of light, called a 'key light,' off to one side of your subject so as to create a slight shadow on the opposite

side of the person's face. Add a second 'fill light' on the opposite side to soften any harsh shadows created by the key light. A 'back light,' placed behind the subject, will help to define and highlight the subject's features and outlines.

If you don't have access to professional lighting equipment, try purchasing inexpensive clamp lights or tripod-mounted work lights from a hardware story like Home Depot. Get some basic, heat-resistant color filters, such as blue gels to help shift the yellow tint of a halogen bulb to white, and soft filters to reduce harshness. To help direct and focus the light, you can wrap black cinefoil around the edges of the lamp. With this 'guerilla' filmmaking set-up, you can experiment and play with a variety of lighting set-ups.

For more DIY lighting tips, explore filmmaking websites such as No Film School and IndieWire. To get started, here's a concise and clear blog post from Premium Beat outlining the basics of lighting placement in a range of situations on set and in the field.

MIRA NAIR / CHAPTER FIFTEEN

EDITING

"Editing must achieve its own rhythm."

EDITING

Subchapters

CHAPTER REVIEW

One of the most important traits to look for in a potential editor for your film is musical sensitivity. The choices of how long to hold on each moment, when to cut from image to image, and at what pace, are all rhythmic decisions, and are the essence of film editing. Barry Brown, who edited three of Mira's films—the documentary *India Cabaret*, *Salaam Bombay!*, and *Queen of Katwe*—has an inventive and bold cutting style that manages to layer scenes and transitions between stories in a very musical way.

For Mira, the edit is one of the most exciting phases of filmmaking, and she views it as the final rewrite of the story's structure. In fact, she involves her editors from the start by sharing early drafts of her script with them, and bringing them on set during production. Because of the complex interlocking story threads in many of her films, Mira tries to anticipate coverage that will be needed in the edit room, and there is no better person than the editor to tell her what she may be missing.

A week into production, the editor begins to assemble footage from the daily rushes into rough edits, confirming whether the raw materials necessary to build a scene have been gathered. A loose assembly of the full story is usually ready to watch as soon as filming has wrapped—but the editor's work has only just begun. Figuring out the final rhythm and flow of your story can take weeks or even months. Mira encourages you to work directly with your editor throughout postproduction, in a very hands-on way. The edit is a controlled environment where possibilities can be tested, confusions addressed, and solutions proposed.

Studio executives will likely watch the cuts and give notes at points throughout the process. Listen respectfully, but don't feel obligated to follow through with their proposed solutions. Think instead about the underlying problem or confusion they're pointing out, and come up with an original solution. Often you and your editor will find a way to address their concerns with far more richness and nuance than expected.

Many of the best storytelling ideas come from actually seeing images in juxtaposition. There is great power in contrast, and a striking difference between two moments can completely change the feeling or mood of a scene. Mira gives two examples from *Monsoon Wedding*, in which the juxtaposition of imagery elevates a scene to become more than the sum of its parts.

1. The first involves cutting from an interior to an exterior, following a moment of tenderness. As a husband and wife embrace in bed, the next shot cuts outside to a child on a cart, as the camera almost floats past and pans to a wedding car covered with flowers. Though this exterior shot may seem to be a non sequitur, the effect is to open up the private, domestic drama and connect it to something more universal.

2. The second involves a technique called the smash cut. Mira loves to cut abruptly from one scene to another, leaving little time to linger on emotions. One of the more daring transitions in *Monsoon Wedding* follows the banishment of Uncle Tej. After he leaves, two characters share a moment of reconciliation, and the tension is suddenly broken by a smash cut to a blaring brass wedding band playing in the rain. This creates a catharsis that would have been diluted if the previous scene had overstayed its welcome.

With each successive cut of your film, check in with viewers to see how they react. Show earlier edits to fellow filmmakers, but as the cut becomes more and more refined, Mira encourages you to also hold preview screenings with anonymous audiences. Focus group and questionnaire responses will provide valuable information on where there is clarity and confusion. But even more revealing is the energy of the audience while watching. Where do they laugh, cry, or fidget? Mira often sits in the theater amongst the viewers, in order to sense directly where her film is resonating and where it is not.

Continue editing until you feel that your movie exceeds expectations. Even when *Monsoon Wedding* had already sold at Cannes to the Independent Film Channel, Mira wanted to keep editing. She sensed that audiences were getting restless and impatient at times, and kept tightening the film until it was an entire 15 minutes shorter. She also added new layers of dialogue to the edit in order to clarify and enrich the story. Like Mira, you should endeavor to tighten and maximize your own storytelling until the very end of postproduction. Don't stop editing until you are satisfied.

LEARN MORE

Film editing involves many tricks and techniques that you may not be familiar with, such as the smash cut for which Mira has a particular fondness. One of the more complete glossaries of film editing terminology can be found online here. The definitions are actually written with screenwriters in mind, helping you understand the type of shots and cuts that can be specified in the text. Here, for instance, is the site's explanation of the smash cut:

"An especially sharp transition. This style of cut is usually used to convey destruction or quick emotional changes."

The glossary then provides a script excerpt from a hypothetical horror movie as an example of how a smash cut can be used. Anyone wishing to get better acquainted with how to talk the language of film should explore this list.

Read *In the Blink of an Eye* by Walter Murch (Silman-James Press, 1992). This classic essay by the acclaimed Hollywood editor explores the question of why cuts work. Less technical than philosophical, it's a wonderful and concise introduction to the emotional intuitions and rhythmic decisions required of the film editor.

Want to try your hand at editing? Teach yourself the most popular video editing software today, by signing up for a month's subscription to Premiere Pro. Buy or borrow the definitive manual, *Adobe Premiere Pro CC Classroom in a Book,* by Maxim Jago (Adobe Press, 2018), and complete each of the 18 project-based lessons to learn step-by-step techniques for working with digital media.

ASSIGNMENT:

When you have a cut of your film and feel ready for feedback, organize a rough-cut screening with your trusted inner circle of colleagues and friends. Invite people who you know will give helpful, critical, and constructive advice. The goal is not to get congratulatory pats on the back and ego-soothing praise, but rather to find out where your viewers are confused or losing interest, and to gauge how well your story is working at different points in the edit.

Here are some things to consider as you plan your feedback screening:

How are you going to make your guests feel welcome?

Provide comfortable seating, clear directions to the bathroom, and plenty of snacks and beverages. Remember, you are not only asking invitees to stay for the movie, but for an in-depth discussion of the film as well, which could last for an additional hour or two, or even longer. Repay their favor by being a generous host, and express clear gratitude for their time.

Should you have the audience take notes while watching the film?

You can certainly provide blank notepads and pens for viewers to jot down thoughts while watching, but try to keep it to that. First-time organizers of feedback screenings sometimes make the mistake of giving the audience a script to follow along with, or a multi-page questionnaire to respond to. These materials actually distract from the viewing experience, and can mean that major plot points or important visuals are missed because viewers are looking down at page rather than up at the screen.

What kinds of questions should you ask once the film ends?

Start by asking what is working. Feedback can often veer immediately to what's NOT working, so it is important to first confirm which elements of your story are resonating and having the impact that you intended. To do this, ask open-endedquestions about your viewers' positive impressions, such as the following:

- When did you feel most engaged?
- Which characters made an impression on you, and why?

Next, try a more neutral line of questioning about your audience's general reactions to the film, such as:

- How did the film make you feel?
- What do you think this film is about?

Finally, venture into questions about what's not working, such as:

- Where were you bored?
- Is anything in the story confusing or unclear to you?

The aim of scaffolding your questioning in this way is to ensure that the feedback you receive will be instructive. Identifying problem areas is vital, but equally important is to confirm your film's strengths.

How are you going to record the feedback?

During the post-screening discussion, make sure to take copious notes, and identify the speaker each time so that you can follow up on any comments that may need further elaboration. Add your own thoughts to the notes regarding potential solutions, and highlight anything that you found particularly important. Use this record to create an 'action list' of changes to tackle in the next cut.

Should you record audio of the feedback conversation on a Zoom recorder or similar device?

Sure—but never rely *solely* on that. Recordings can be lost or deleted, and filmmakers often find that it's too time consuming to listen back to the full recording. Handwritten notes are the more useful reference, even if they are more effort to create on the front end. If you prefer to listen freely and engage in the discussion without having to write, then designate someone from your creative team to serve as scribe.

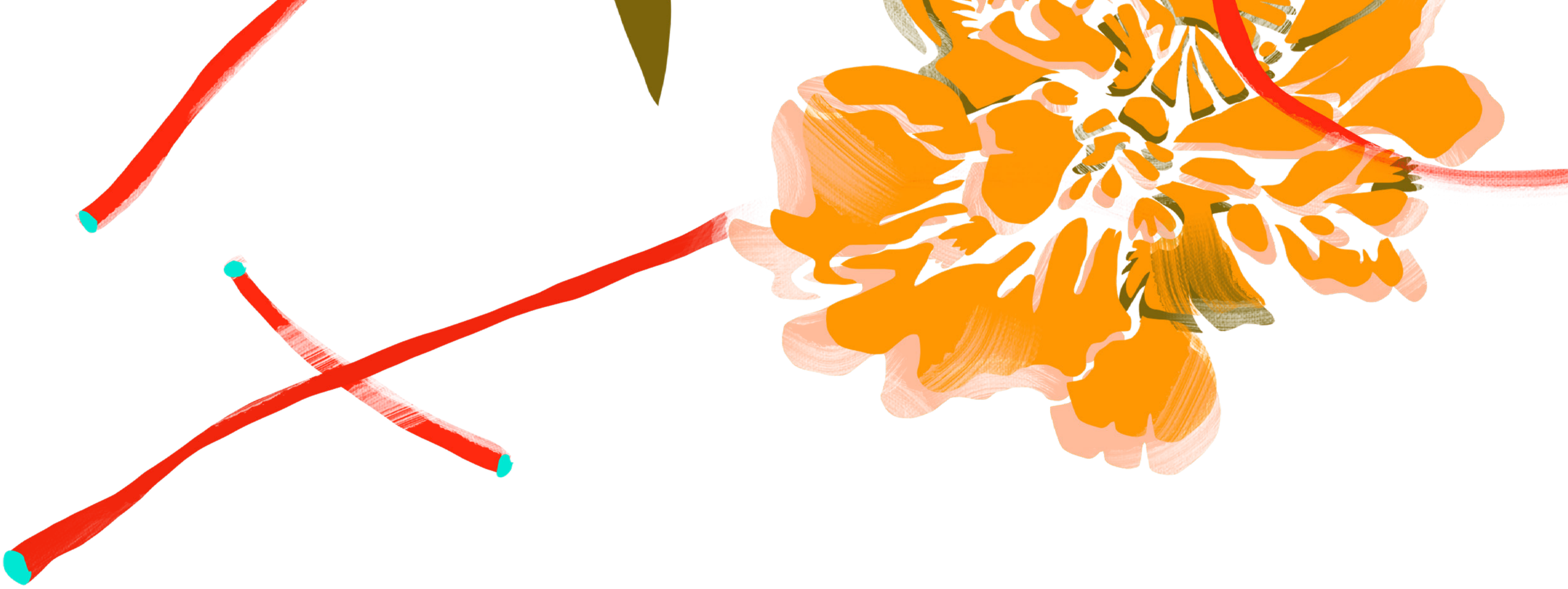
What if you don't agree with the feedback?

If you think a suggestion or criticism of your film is totally wrong, don't argue. Listen. Your job during a feedback session is to find out where your movie is resonating with viewers, and where it is not. Rather than pushing back or defending your artistic choices, ask questions that prompt clarification and elaboration. "Where were you bored?" "What aspects of the main character did you dislike?" etc.

How are you going to decide which suggestions to implement, and which to ignore?

Feedback screenings are most informative when you read between the comments, and think deeply with your creative team about your viewers meant vs. what they said. Often suggestions will offer up a specific solution, such as "I really think you should cut the flashback." Before following such advice, try to identify the underlying problem that the proposed solution is meant to fix. Is the flashback simply coming at the wrong time? Does it happen too abruptly? Is it too long, or too short? Experiment with your own solutions, and use the feedback as a way to identify areas for improvement. You know your film better than anyone else, so trust your intuitions. Make changes that you think strengthen your original vision, and then test them with a new audience. Repeat as needed!

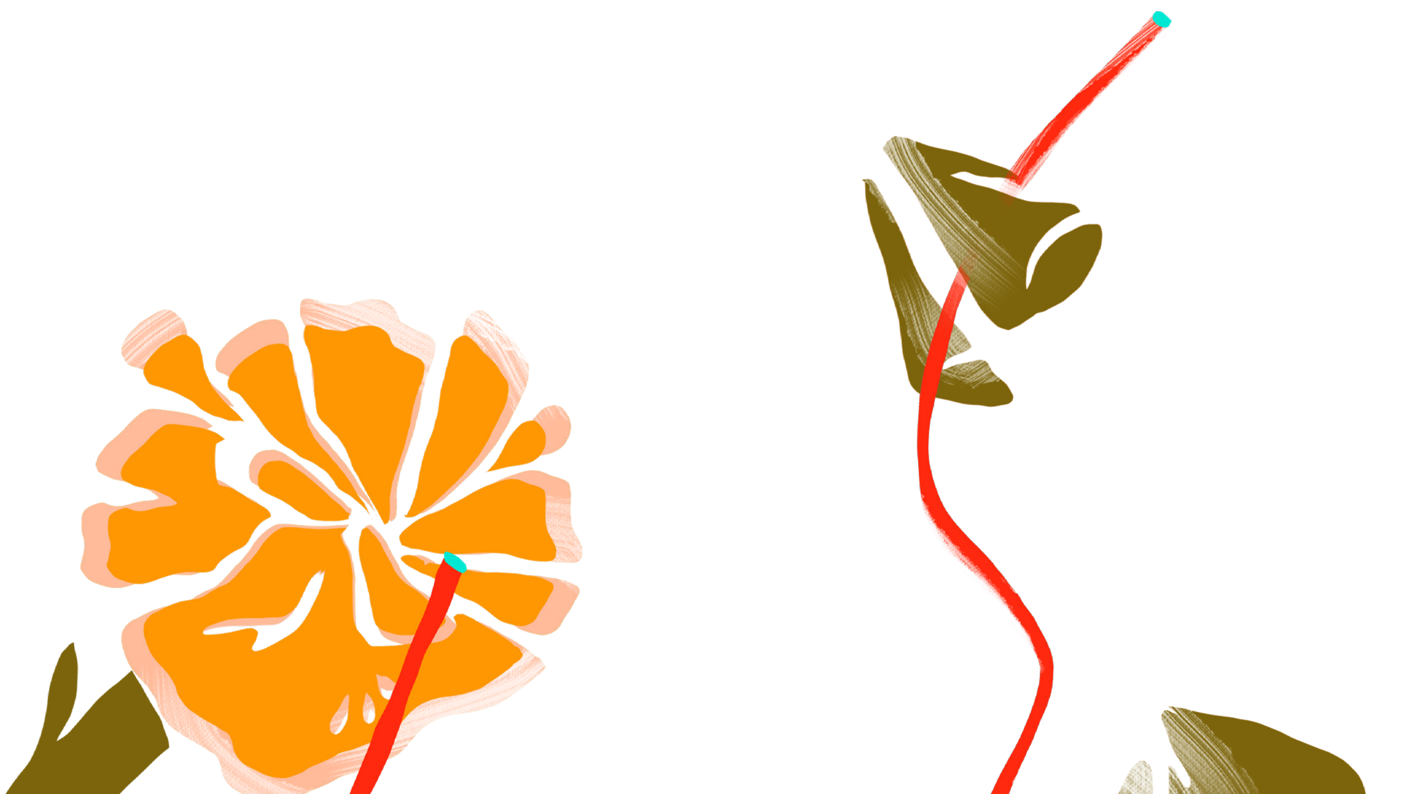
By the way, if you haven't yet developed a trusted inner circle, you can always post your rough cut to The Hub. Draw upon your fellow classmates and the MasterClass community to get feedback and reactions to your work-in-progress.



MIRA NAIR / CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SOUND AND MUSIC

"Without silence, sound does not flourish and music is not heard. And that kind of sifting and balancing is key."



SOUND AND MUSIC

Subchapters

CHAPTER REVIEW

Although sound design is often one of the last steps to shaping your film, you should be thinking about it from the very beginning. How will you use audio to build and embellish the world of your story? In some movies, sound is so relevant to the unfolding drama that it can impact and motivate the movement of the camera. During postproduction, sound editing interacts with visual editing, signaling to the viewer where to look and even how to feel. And it can even serve a musical function: imagine a scene scored to a symphony of street noise, or to a soft serenade of wind passing through trees in a garden.

However vital sound may be, silence is equally important—and, in a sense, is what gives both sound and music its power. A film that is wallpapered beginning to end with music and background noise will quickly desensitize your audience. The best designers of a film's audio landscape know to use music and sound sparingly, with intention, and also subtly, without broadcasting too blatantly what to think or feel.

Mira often works with sound designer Dave Paterson. On *Monsoon Wedding,* he devised a brilliantly subtle way to emphasize the entrance of Uncle Tej, the chief antagonist of the film. Instead of manipulating the audience with an obvious audio cue that the villain has arrived, David introduced a barely perceptible screech of a hawk in the distance. The simple association of Tej with a predatory animal is enough to unsettle the audience, even if nobody consciously notices the sound.

Your composer is another crucial collaborator in designing the universe of sound in your film. Music has the power to directly influence human emotion, and so your conversations with your composer should be about what you want your audience to feel during key moments. Working with composer Mychael Dana, Mira wants music to elevate the audience, create catharsis, and make their emotions soar. She describes a sequence of three scenes in *Monsoon Wedding* that were among the most poignant in the film. Faced with the revelation of his niece having been sexually abused, the central character Lalit asks his wife to hold him in the middle of the night. This is accompanied by a delicate and intimate piano interlude, which then lifts into a beautiful melody as the city around them awakens. This street montage allows theaudience to breath, to feel and process the emotions of the previous scene. The music then settles into silence as Lalit opens the door to his niece's room, begging her not to withdraw. The focus of the scene turns to the words of Lalit's plea and the expressions on his niece Ria's face as she listens. This is the kind of "yin and yang of sound and silence" for which Mira strives.

One of the tricky things about music composition is that it often cannot be undertaken until the visual edit of a picture is finalized and locked. A tool that directors and editors use to deal with

this absence is a 'temp track,' or a pre-existing track of music that approximates the anticipated feeling of the score. This is your opportunity to try out music you are excited by, as a way to convey key elements that you want your composer to bring to each scene. Mira, for instance, loves Indian classical music, and is drawn to a particular instrument called the sarangi which has a rasping resonance that feels to her like a 'heart being ravaged.'

Mychael Danna deserves special recognition for his role in making *Monsoon Wedding* such a memorable cinematic experience. The central theme that he wrote for the film was a beautiful and sensuous melody called "Love and Marigolds." Mychael worked to adapt this melody into different tempos and treatments throughout the movie. For instance, the opening credits were accompanied by a wedding band playing a very upbeat version of the theme. He also met head-on the challenge of making the same theme encompass both the upper class world of the bride and groom, and the servant class reality of Alice and Dubey. In fact, near the climax of the film, the same music ties together these two different couples, as the bride and groom embrace on the rooftop, while below Dubey presents a heart of marigolds to Alice. The music unites two different worlds around vows of love, in a way that few other cinematic tools could have achieved.

LEARN MORE

Each year, two different Oscars are awarded for sound design, one for Best Sound Editing and one for Best Sound Mixing. Few viewers understand the difference. In fact, the question is so common that the *New York Times* recently published an article with a definitive, once-and-for all answer. The explanation includes two videos created by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences outlining in detail the distinct craft of each job—sound editing, which involves *collecting and recording* the audio effects needed to edit a film; and sound mixing, which involves *combining and balancing* that audio with dialogue and music during postproduction. Sound designers oversee both processes, ensuring a unified approach to audio throughout a film's creation.

Are you curious about how film composers approach their work? Watch *Score: A Film Music Documentary* (2016), which offers a glimpse into how Hollywood's best and brightest composers approach the special challenge of the film score. Nearly 60 composers, directors, orchestrators, studio musicians, recording artists, and music journalists were interviewed for the film. Two composers of note are featured: Hans Zimmer, best known for *The Dark Knight*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and *Inception* scores, and who is a featured instructor on MasterClass; and Mychael Danna, who was Mira's celebrated collaborator on *Monsoon Wedding*, *Kama Sutra*, and *Vanity Fair*.

ASSIGNMENT

Mine your music collection for tracks that excite and inspire you. Can you identify any pieces of music that approximate the feeling you imagine for your film's score? Which songs remind you of certain characters, and which create moods that seem to fit various scenes from the script? Is there a track that could work for the opening or closing credits, or as the main musical theme of your story?

Once you've collected some exciting options, create a playlist for your composer as a way to convey the soundscape you imagine for your film. Share the same music files with your editor, who will then be able to fold them into rough cuts of the film as 'temp tracks.'

What if you're not finding any music from your personal collection that feels right for your film? Try digging into a stock music source. The online audio libraries below are great places to find high quality music, designed for film and television, that won't cost an arm and a leg to license.

APM MUSIC
https://www.apmmusic.com/
With over 375,000 tracks (and growing), APM Music is probably the largest stock music library, and includes other services such as custom scoring and music director assistance. APM licensing fees tend to be more expensive than the other stock libraries in this list, but the price comes with quality.

KILLER TRACKS
https://www.killertracks.com/
Like APM Music, Killer Tracks offers other services besides licensing, including music-supervision. They specialize in digital albums, which are original works by well-known composers in the entertainment business.

MUSOPEN
https://musopen.org/
Musopen is a non-profit library of music in the public domain. You can download recordings for free.

PREMIUMBEAT
https://www.premiumbeat.com/
PremiumBeat carefully curates its music collection, and provides perpetual licenses that allow you to use a track forever and on multiple projects, with no additional fees. It also features a great blog with info on all aspects of media creation.

STOCKMUSIC.NET
https://stockmusic.net/
Stockmusic.net allows you to purchase music for a one-time fee. You can search their collection by keyword, genre, instrument, and even mood.

MIRA NAIR / CLOSING

GO TELL YOUR STORY

"The key to making films is to have something to say. Something that is distinctive, never seen before, something that only you can bring to life."